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## **ASPECTS OF BELIEF**



# ASPECTS OF BELIEF

*The William Belden Noble Lectures for 1937*

BY

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## THE WILLIAM BELDEN NOBLE LECTURES

**T**HIS Lectureship was constituted a perpetual foundation in Harvard University in 1898 as a memorial to the late William Belden Noble of Washington, D.C. (Harvard, 1885). The deed of gift provides that the lectures shall be delivered annually and that they shall be published. The purpose of the Lectureship may be expressed in the following words cited from the deed of gift by which it was established:

*“The object of the founder of the Lectures is to continue the mission of William Belden Noble, whose supreme desire it was to extend the influence of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life; to make known the meaning of the words of Jesus, ‘I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.’ In accordance with the large interpretation of the Influence of Jesus by the late Phillips Brooks, with whose religious teaching he in whose memory the Lectures are established and also the founder of the Lectures were in deep sympathy, it is intended that the scope of the Lectures shall be as wide as the highest interests of humanity. With this end in view,—the perfection of the spiritual man and the*

*consecration by the spirit of Jesus, of every department of human character, thought and activity,—the Lectures may include philosophy, literature, art, poetry, the natural sciences, political economy, sociology, ethics, history both civil and ecclesiastical, as well as theology and the more direct interests of the religious life. Beyond a sympathy with the purpose of the Lectures, as thus defined, no restriction is placed upon the lecturer.”*

## PREFACE

**T**HESE lectures are printed as they were delivered except for the inclusion of certain sections then necessarily omitted. I am aware that the ground covered will be familiar to those who read the larger books which deal with religious belief. Of any such readers I would ask that it be borne in mind that the lectures were prepared for and delivered to an audience very largely composed of undergraduate members of a great American University, and not without some previous and recent experience of the outlook of those of them who were likely to be interested in such lectures.

My gratitude is due and is expressed to the President and Fellows of Harvard College for the honour of their invitation to be the Noble Lecturer for the academic year 1936-37 and for appointing me acting-Dean of the University Memorial Church during three months of the absence of my friend Dean Willard L. Sperry. It is also my pleasant duty to thank the President and Mrs. James B. Conant for their warm welcome and many acts of kindness. I am grateful also to the Master of Lowell House and Mrs. Julian Coolidge, and to the Tutors of the House, for doing

so much to make my stay there enjoyable. Those who have visited America for any similar purpose will know that it is impossible to make adequate acknowledgment of the unlimited hospitality and unfailing kindness which surround the visitor from the moment of arrival or to express his regret at those constant farewells he exchanges with such pleasant friends and acquaintance, which terminate personal contacts he would fain but cannot prolong. But a word of thanks must be added to Dean Sperry's secretaries, Mrs. Kidder and Arthur Colbourn, who assisted me so faithfully and so well, and to my colleagues of the Dean and Chapter of Liverpool, who made my visit possible by a generous rearrangement of our duties.

J. S. B.

LIVERPOOL

*July 1987*

# ASPECTS OF BELIEF

## CHAPTER I

### CONCERNING MAN

**G**OD, it has been said, is the beginning of religion and the end of philosophy, and the beginning and the end are one. These words may serve to indicate the ideal relation in which the practical life of religion should stand to human thought. Religion always contains some amount of human thought, of some quality. Theology is the ordered knowledge of what religion is and implies, and the interpretation of the world and man in the light of it. Religion is very much more than human thought; but its character is always dependent upon human ideas and beliefs, hopes and fears, derived otherwise than from some isolated activity called religion. Religious experience is always largely determined by the contents of our minds as the experience comes to us or as we seek it. It follows that theology which would fain be knowledge of what is actual, in other words, theology which aspires to truth,<sup>1</sup> cannot be simply the explication.

<sup>1</sup> Truth is the correspondence of our minds with things as they are.

tion of a particular type of experience called religious experience: it must also concern itself with whatever kinds of knowledge about the world and man enter into religious experience and largely determine its form and content.

It is true and for religion profoundly important, as the Barthians insist, that God is not primarily the object of human knowledge. God Himself, communion with Whom is religion, is not merely an idea in our minds, or the creation of our minds. He is the living, active Spirit who is beforehand with us in every movement we make towards Him; so that it is less true to say that we choose Him than to say that He chooses us, less true that we lay hold of and possess Him than that He lays hold of and possesses us. But there are those who not only speak of the Word of God<sup>1</sup> coming to man from beyond knowledge and beyond history, which may be true: they strangely seem to attach no significance to their awareness that it is so. They go on to say not only that natural knowledge and even natural theology lie 'in the evil one', but they deny that man has any faculty wherewith to judge of Revelation, even when his conscience has been purified by the Word of God.

This is baseless dogmatism, an attempt to revive the obsolete. If we may not trust such knowledge as natural theology may attain, there are no grounds for trusting that which is simply asserted to be revealed.

<sup>1</sup> This term, in Barth's usage, seems to me as near to an idea without content as it is possible to get.

It is, I believe, the bedrock of religious faith that spiritual things are spiritually discerned; but there is little use in saying so, particularly in these days, unless there are reasons for holding that spiritual discernment is not an illusion. Whatever human knowledge may be, whatever its status in relation to Reality, and however much error and illusion it may contain, in the order of attaining knowledge it is a fact that our knowledge of ourselves and of other persons, and of the external world, comes before our knowledge of God. Knowledge of ourselves and of the external world is not immediate or unmediated: it is reflective knowledge. But it is both easier and more inevitable than our knowledge of God. If we may trust it, we may trust our knowledge of God reached in the same way. Religious faith, its insights and its values, will then have grounds as well as causes.

But if we may not trust our knowledge of ourselves neither may we trust our knowledge of God. It is not for a moment suggested that there is no real communion with God, no true experience of His enveloping grace and love, unless or until we have understood the nature of man. Indeed, unless religion be illusion, it is only in the light which these experiences afford that man's nature can be adequately understood. What God means by us is for religion a more important question than what we mean by God: 'God is the beginning of religion'. But if and when our purpose is to set forth religious knowledge in an ordered form, and to show that it and the faith on which it rests



have intellectual justification, we are involved in questions as to what human personality is and how it arises, and about man's true position in creation—in a word, with the nature of man. It is with some aspects of this question, and it must needs be only in outline, that we shall be concerned in this and in the next lecture.

The natural sciences now disclose wider fields of knowledge relevant to our subject than those derivable from the Bible and Church history. Any modern doctrine of man must accept scientific data and the conclusions to which they point. Several branches of science justify beyond reasonable doubt a broad theory of Evolution: there is no alternative theory, possessing any title to credence, of that continuity in change which the known universe reveals. It should, however, be noted that evolution is an inevitable inference rather than an observed fact; and its formulation changes. It no longer means, as once it did, simply the progressive unfolding of what existed actually, if germinally, from the first. Evolution is now described as 'emergent' or 'epigenetic'. This means that existing elements, interacting with each other and with the environment, themselves form creative syntheses from which there arises what is genuinely new. There is not simple continuous change but continuity in very complex change; and even small changes are no more self-explanatory than big ones. There is discontinuity as well as continuity, and the use of such

descriptive words as 'emergent' and 'epigenetic' should not be allowed to hide the fact that the newness is unexplained. Emergent evolution is not self-explanatory: it is a statement of facts which demand explanation.

Among students whose education has been too exclusively in natural science, and who in consequence are often almost entirely uncritical of their own pre-suppositions and assumptions, and also among the multitudes who gain from them their slight knowledge of science, it is still widely supposed that modern knowledge about man is contradictory to or inconsistent with what are certainly the essentials of any Christian doctrine of him. Such opinions have no solid foundation, and an indication of the main reasons why they are baseless may be outlined.

The discovery that celestial bodies obeyed mechanical laws rendered mechanism attractive as an explanation of all things. Since then, as a methodological device, the mechanistic hypothesis in the pursuit of scientific knowledge has been within its own limits supreme. It is a much more recent recognition that *it is a mental device*, immensely useful in assisting discovery in special fields of research, but nevertheless only a point of view. This recognition, however, is coming to be characteristic of the scientific outlook. It is publicly proclaimed by many of the eminent men of science who use it most successfully. They are ceasing to claim or even to hope that it can ever explain the physical universe, much less the highly

complex organized being that man is, or that it can account for human experience at the level of self-consciousness; and it is this—human experience at the level of self-consciousness—which is the primary basis of all knowledge. This human experience, though it is often the source of illusion, and may contain error and much unconscious metaphysic, and may thus need much criticism and refinement, remains nevertheless the only foundation from which we can start and to which, if we will explain, we must continually return. This truth is well expressed in the following words:

We must begin with experience, because otherwise there is no problem; and return to experience, since otherwise no solution is made good; and proceed on the analogy of experience, since otherwise there is a failure of that continuity and resemblance in which explanation consists.<sup>1</sup>

Deterministic mechanism is itself a thread of human thought woven through physical science by the mental loom which forms the fabric of understanding.<sup>2</sup> The several fields of scientific research are abstracted from what forms the whole of direct human experience; and the abstraction is progressive. The abstracted realms are analysed until it appears possible to express the 'ultimate' in terms of the most abstract. On the other hand, the evolutionary process is a process because it is synthetic: man and human

<sup>1</sup> Carveth Read, *The Metaphysics of Nature*, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> See Dampier-Whetham, *A History of Science*, p. 371.

life are supremely synthetic. The method of science is analytic. Facts of psychology are expressed as far as possible in terms of physiological reactions and mechanism; these, in turn, are resolved into terms of chemistry and then into those of physics, and physics into mathematics. The assumption that this series of abstractions discloses the concrete reality of human experience is what Dr. Whitehead has called 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'.

It is to these abstract entities, or to some of them, that deterministic mechanism is relevant. But the method involves an ideal reduction into mere units of what concrete experience knows as collective and individual facts which have *meaning*. Actually, we feel, we see, we hear. That is where we begin. 'Matter' is the name for the identity common to or which underlies all objects of sense experience. As Mr. Collingwood says, 'The old-fashioned gross matter was just a relic of sensible qualities not yet extruded from the pure concept.' Hence, materialism, mechanism, mathematics are essential to the sciences as they have hitherto developed because of their chosen methods. Again, to quote Mr. Collingwood:

Materialism is the truth about any object, just in so far as this object is reducible to terms of pure mathematics; and no object is so reducible except by consciously or unconsciously shutting our eyes to everything that differentiates it from anything else. This conscious or unconscious act of abstraction is the very being of the scientific consciousness, and it is therefore no matter for

pained surprise when science shows a bias towards determinism, behaviourism and materialism generally.<sup>1</sup>

Even when this reduction of different things to identities common to them all has been done, no sure foundation for mechanism now exists in what was formerly its citadel. Dr. Whitehead writes:

It cannot be too clearly understood that the various physical laws which appear to apply to the behaviour of atoms are not mutually consistent as at present formulated. The appeal to mechanism on behalf of biology was in its origin an appeal to the well-attested self-consistent physical concepts as expressing the basis of all natural phenomena. But at present there is no such system of concepts.<sup>2</sup>

Scientists may be confident that in the future science will subsume the present inconsistency and indeterminacy under a more adequate mental mechanistic model. If they are, the basis of their confidence is an act of faith of the same nature as that which believes the universe will not destroy its own highest values. Science is not the infallible reading of what, to people learned enough to understand, is self-evident. In such science as concerns itself with what is actual, progress depends, as in other human activities, upon human insights, 'bright ideas', 'happy inspirations', which are pragmatically verified. While not presuming to assign any limits to future triumphs of science, we may affirm that there is no reason to think its triumphs

<sup>1</sup> *Speculum Mentis*, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, p. 150.

will do otherwise than show how great is the extent, and at the same time how subordinate the significance, of the mission which mechanism has to fulfil in the structure of the world.<sup>1</sup> For the science which deals with what is alleged to be the physically ultimate, issues in the framing of highly complex imaginary models, whose entities are not observable. Indeed, the opinion that, in its more remote analyses, 'physical science deals with a world of symbolic entities' is widely and explicitly admitted by the most eminent scientists in this field. We can get rid of what is qualitative and apprehensible by the senses only at the cost of getting rid of what is actual. None need minimize the accomplishments of this type of science or deny its immense fruitfulness. Not only so, but the knowledge thus disclosed must in some sense be part of the structure of reality. But it is only on the gigantic assumption that what has been left out from the first for purposes of specialized research, really does not exist, that it can masquerade as the kind of explanation in which the human mind can rest.

The familiar illustration of a man finding small piles of stones stretching across a desert indicates the only kind of explanation which has finality. All manner of speculation about the phenomenon would cease on the discovery that the stones were so arranged in order to mark the way from one village or oasis to another. No analysis of the stones or of the distances between the piles of them could in itself reveal that

<sup>1</sup> Lotze, *Microcosmus*, Introduction, p. xvi.

explanation, nor would any such subsequent study upset it. That is the only kind of explanation in which the human mind can rest, and fruitfulness in such explanation is indispensable to what the mind can accept as adequate truth. In all our explanatory knowledge (as distinct from descriptive knowledge) and therefore in philosophy and theology, there are elements of human interpretation: it is, to use Dr. Tennant's word, *anthropic*. A man may choose to do without such explanation and profess himself content with abstract or fictional descriptions, but that is a matter of personal idiosyncrasy, possibly interesting to his biographer, but which need not influence those who are not willing thus elaborately to 'give it up'.

Life is not found apart from matter, but we cannot say that it is matter or a property of matter. Nor should we be saying anything significant if we did, because we do not know what matter is. What we call matter and what we call mind (or spirit) may be an ultimate dualism: on the other hand, matter may be the appearance of a humble grade of spirit. No problem of religious belief is affected however that speculative question be answered. The gradual evolution of more complex and higher forms of life from simpler and lower forms is established. We may, if we choose, affirm as a belief that life 'emerges' under certain favourable synthetic material conditions, but the evolution of the living from the non-living is not established. The assertion that the living does emerge from

the non-living rests upon 'a rather indefinite foundation of intuitive belief'.<sup>1</sup> Of life's origin 'all that we know is that we know nothing'.<sup>2</sup> In our experience life, however it arose, is something ultimate which we just have to accept. Its presence outside ourselves is a matter of inference.

If life should ever be produced artificially, what would be seen would be matter behaving in such a way that we should infer the presence of life. The triumph would be very impressive, and one fraught with unknown possibilities. This result, if it be ever attained, will only be attained at a very high level of intelligence, and it would remain just as unlikely as it is now that it was first produced in nature, and on so vast a scale, by any lower intelligence. Little would be explained: we should still not know what life is. No circumstances are conceivable in which it would not be more correct to say that a certain synthetic form of matter is the simplest form of life than to say that life is a property of matter. We infer life to account for observed behaviour; such an inference is possible and satisfactory to us only because we have immediate knowledge of life in ourselves. The inference is verified pragmatically, and not otherwise.

The same is true of what we call mind. On the analogy of the evolution of higher from lower forms of life we infer a similar evolution of mind, though the

<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Dr. Gray, President of the Zoological Section of the British Association in 1933.

<sup>2</sup> Sir F. G. Hopkins, President of the British Association in the same year.



separate evidence is in certain respects less conclusive. The simpler the organism the less evidence we find of anything we can regard as distinctively mental activity, until we work back to a stage where we cannot recognize any presence of mind. But we certainly cannot trace the coming of mind from anything that is not mind. Nor can we even imagine how anything that is not mind could produce it, or how mental life as a kind of 'property' could inhere in some substratum other than itself; while if we could, the imagining would itself be the work of mind.

'Emergence' is one general feature of the whole evolutionary process and so the abruptness of discontinuity is decreased. But to call the whole process 'creative' neither explains it nor informs us what the creative agency is. Attempts to ignore mind and purposive activity in man, or as possible agents in all evolution, and to account for everything in terms of 'selection' and of mechanistic concepts, have no prospect of success. The failure is that mind always exists both as the essential condition precedent to the attempts being made at all and as an unexplained remainder when they have been made. The attempts themselves are of mental origin and construction. The concept of mechanism implies our human knowledge of machinery, and this we know only as expressing the purposes of mind. Observation can only reveal an orderly sequence in events, material or mental. Any relation between the events such as we call 'causation' or 'necessitation' is read into experience by the

mind which experiences: it cannot be directly observed. If that relation exists in reality, the universe is the expression of Mind, and human minds partake of its nature: if it does not exist in reality then 'causation' is merely a necessary human symbol for an inscrutable mystery, and mechanistic concepts are then merely figurative and diagrammatic, and in no way explanatory.

Man, as alone we can know him, is a complex animate organism, imagining, thinking, willing, purposing, creating, desiring what is not and striving to achieve it. It is the single being, the man, who experiences, understands, desires and wills. We may analyse human nature into several elements, but these do not exist as separate entities. We cannot therefore explain man by first abstracting these elements one by one and then putting them together again by adding one to another. Any separation between the physical and the mental or spiritual life of man is artificial and unreal. As Dr. Oman says, our understanding of man has been overlaid with patchwork conceptions of his nature: the result is quarrels about abstractions. Man is not just an animal with something added, any more than an animal is a plant with something added. Man is not just a mixture of elements from the various levels of nature. He is a distinct type of being whose life is spiritual as well as physical. What a mind may be without a body nobody knows, nor will any analysis of mind tell us. Without a mind a human body may be a corpse; but we do not first exist as corpses to

which minds are subsequently added. Evolution is an ascending scale in which the higher forms include most of the activities of the lower forms, embracing them in a higher mode of being. Consciousness and self-consciousness arise in a late and complex organism and, as Dr. Whitehead says, primarily illuminate the higher phase in which they arise, and only illuminate lower phases derivatively as these remain components in the higher phase.<sup>1</sup> In a very real sense we may know ourselves better than we know anything else; and such self-knowledge as we may have cannot be invalidated by our knowledge of anything else.

We may thus turn to consider briefly the nature of human personality on the basis of two convictions. First, its moral and spiritual status cannot be impugned on the ground that it has its place in natural evolution; on the contrary, the cost at which it has come to exist enhances its dignity. Just because it is the highest known unity it does not admit of translation into terms lower than itself, without first abstracting all that is specially characteristic of it. Secondly, we cannot fully explain what personality is because we have good reasons for hoping that neither itself nor our understanding of it are yet at all complete. Its development, and the growing experience, insights and understanding of generations yet to come will no doubt contribute to the richness and fullness of personality. Its essence is self-consciousness marked by enduring

<sup>1</sup> *Process and Reality*, p. 226 f.

identity throughout growth and change; it possesses real individuality, both in itself and in its outward activities; and it is by its power of self-determination, most of all in moral self-determination and in its apprehension of spiritual life, that it rises to its full stature.

There have been many attempts to explain the facts of the continuity and development of mental life while denying the real existence of the soul or enduring ego. They all depend on such fictions as the existence of mental states which can interact with each other without being the states of an enduring subject to which they belong. They put forward as explanation what is really a legion of miracles, and result in insoluble perplexities. We know with greater immediacy than we know anything else that there is a temporal continuity of mental as well as of bodily life. It cannot be resolved into a series of disconnected or discrete streams of sensations which know one another, for *continuity in transition* is of the essence of mental life. A real mental or spiritual activity *living through* its own experiences is the indispensable basis of any intellectual process, and therefore of any knowledge whatever.

This activity, though we only know it as embodied, cannot be fully explained by any analysis of the body: such analysis is one of its own activities. The possibility of description and explanation, of human knowledge of actual events as connected or determined, is not to be explained except by the real existence of an abiding ego or soul, the subject of our

conscious states; it appears to function even in sleep. Belief in the reality of the soul, building up its mental life in vital connection with the body through which it gains all its experiences, does not involve the idea of basic soul-substance, unchanging and necessarily immortal. Psychology destroys some attributes of the old soul-substance; but, as Dr. Tennant says, there is a residuum, derived from the given, which cannot be dispensed with. It is that of the *continuant*, of which feelings are states, and of which volition and the knowledge-process are activities. Its existence is not known immediately, but only at a stage of advanced reflection, but in this respect knowledge of its existence does not differ from our knowledge of the more or less orderly conceptual world in the existence of which we all believe. The abiding ego or soul is not only an idea: it has an actual counterpart. It is known as a real activity because it acts. Unless it is present in rudimentary form and active from our very first sensations, no account can be given of the orderly growth and development of the self. Without it there is no explanation of why our manifold sensations and perceptions ever make the unity of mental life which clearly exists, and upon which all knowledge depends. To hold that mind comes into existence out of nothing other than haphazard bodily sensations, forming themselves like a string of pearls without the string, leaves the unity of mental life, its continuity, its growing purposiveness and character without any explanation.

On that strange hypothesis there is no reason why man should be other than 'a legion of incompatibles'. To quote Dr. Tennant: "Chance and unfounded coincidence, multiplied a thousandfold, are offered as the explanation of the reasonableness and stability of the life of man. Here is credulity at its maximum." Mental life is explained only by the existence of an active subject living through, sorting out and arranging its varied experiences. All attempts to explain human life without the enduring ego or soul simply beg the question: they assume that thoughts can exist without a thinking subject. Such theories do nothing more than reduce the mysterious to the unintelligible, and at the same time they remove all ground for trusting the knowledge on which they themselves depend. The soul is the one real spiritual thing certainly known; if not, nothing is known at all.

The soul is not the self-conscious personality, but one essential element therein, without whose continuance and activity the slowly built-up personality could not arise. The initial responses of feeling evoked in the soul, through its body, depend upon the soul's own nature. These responses are conditioned by the actual body inherited from parents and ancestors and by external environment. The subjective feeling of *want* gives rise to attention. This is the first step in the activity of willing, which is possible when we are able to form ideas in relation to a felt want, that is, when we can form aims or ends and have motives. Full self-consciousness comes not only or mainly

through introspection but also through awareness of an environment external to that body which is peculiarly the soul's own. The social environment in which we live is also powerful in moulding personality.<sup>1</sup> Thus full self-consciousness is mediated, and as soon as this is reached personality exists, and its higher activities become possible. The individual compares his own activities with those of others. He becomes, as it were, an external observer of himself and thus gains conscience. Reason, conceptual thought and conscience are mediated by intercourse with other persons, by our social environment; when these activities are added to memory, the act of willing and the ordering into a system of the basic responses and interests of the soul or ego, full personality exists, with its possibilities of indefinite growth in moral and spiritual life. Thus personality is a matter of degree. We may be human at birth, but we are only potentially persons.

Man at the dawn of history finds himself confronted by a threefold challenge. He has to make his count with his own nature, with the society of which he finds himself a member, and with the physical universe which frames his life. In the effort to respond to this threefold challenge he rises to his full stature, and brings into play all the powers of his nature. Ultimate factors in his manhood compel him to worship, to reflect, to sit in judgment upon himself, to form relations with others, to admire the world

<sup>1</sup> Later this social environment is itself deeply affected and reshaped by persons.

around him, to remember and register his experiences. And, through all these multiplying activities, he is indivisibly one. He is himself, and not another; a self-directing person in the midst of the bewildering universe, self-judging, self-approving, self-condemning, inexorably free in his apparent and afflicting chains.<sup>1</sup>

These words, taken from the Bishop of Durham's recently published Gifford Lectures, are an admirable summary of man's nature, his position and task in the world and the conditions in which he must perform it. They are as true in their application to the individual person as to the human race. More particularly, the words "inexorably free in his apparent and afflicting chains" indicate a characteristic of human personality which has given rise to the age-long dispute about human freedom and determinism. This theoretical conflict cannot be resolved by merely logical argument. The most significant feature about that interminable logical conflict is that it is interminable, and the reason for this is that a real conflict goes on unceasingly within the self-conscious being. The arguments do but reflect, and can never resolve, the conflict or tension in our nature as we know it from our inner experience. We still carry it about with us, unresolved, even if we suppose ourselves to have proved one or other of its elements to be the whole truth of the matter. We are certainly severely limited, but to maintain that we are also "inexorably free" does not require that we assert the absurdity of an

<sup>1</sup> H. H. Henson, Bishop of Durham, *Christian Morality*, p. 9.



unlimited, unconditioned freedom, or that freedom is unmotivated willing. There is no such entity as 'the will' which first exists and then acts: the reality is the living subject who wills.

In one sense we may say truly that an act of willing requires a motive, and that the motive presupposes the attention of the self to the end in view, and that this attention or interest arises from the agent's character. We may also say that this character is what it is because of the ego or soul and by the quality of previous acts of willing. Thus it looks as though we may say of any particular act that a man could only do other than he does if his character, determined by his interests, attentions, aims and motives, were other than it is. The psychological analysis seems to be a closed circle. Yet this violently conflicts with experience. We experience regret and remorse, and we blame character which results from volition as we do not blame innate disposition or the fact that we possess passional appetites. No theorizing can divest us of the sense of responsibility for our acts of choice or destroy our conviction that frequently, in given circumstances, we could and ought to have done better. Nor is there any doubt that if we could annihilate such conviction and sense of responsibility, human life would undergo a terrible degradation and suffer swift retrogression.

Analysis of the process of willing may seem to reveal a closed circle. But the process which we break up by analysis is, as a whole, *within personality*:

personality is not enclosed within it. The self-conscious person is not completely found at any one stage of the analysis of volition because he is present in all.<sup>1</sup> Just as personality is not the result of putting together the physiological, psychological, ethical phenomena into which we may analyse it, so neither is it nothing more than what analysis discloses in acts of willing. The personal self is always more than its previously formed character. Psychological analysis does but lay bare the springs of voluntary action; and these, as Dr. Tennant observes, are only 'springs' in that they supply the necessary conditions or occasions of volitional activity, without which the subject cannot bestir itself, the person cannot will.

Personal actions are determined, but they are self-determined, and self-determination is not mechanical necessitation. Personality cannot be reduced to terms of cause and effect. In as far as persons have developed settled characters their actions may possibly, and within limits, be predicted. The range of choice is never infinite and is often small. But the range of choice which does exist is all-important and is certainly enough for all the requirements of religion and morality. The same free determination of action is not by any means always repeated in like circumstances, while the same types of action are found in the most diverse environments. It is because personal conduct, being self-determined, is characterized by a measure

<sup>1</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, third edition, p. 292 f.

of orderliness and may therefore in a measure be understood, that the deterministic theory has appeared plausible. But the real freedom which exists is, as Dr. Oman says, the defiance of elements which suggest necessity, and those elements keep freedom within bounds. They therefore give freedom a meaning, and ourselves a consciousness of it, which otherwise we could not have. Unless both the freedom and the limitations were real the controversy could never have arisen, and for the same reason it does not admit of an abstract logical solution.

When a man of science devises ingenious experiments with complicated apparatus, and after prolonged effort reaches a solution: when from the mind of an architect or an engineer, directing gigantic corporate work, there finally issues a cathedral, an airship, a vast suspension bridge or a tunnel—if we are asked to believe that these whole processes are ‘explicable’, or could conceivably be predictable, in terms of mechanical responses to an environment itself similarly determined, we can but feel that the religious demands upon faith are slight and reasonable in comparison. Credulity and incredulity, like other extremes, meet. Dr. Whitehead’s words may be quoted:

Many a scientist has patiently designed experiments for the *purpose* of substantiating his belief that animal operations are motivated by no purposes. He has perhaps spent his spare time in writing articles to prove that human beings are as other animals, so that ‘purpose’ is a

category irrelevant for the explanation of their bodily activities, his own activities included. Scientists animated by 'the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, when the personality which transcends the activities and elements into which we may analyse it has been ignored, and a self-consistent deterministic argument elaborated on the basis of those abstracted activities and elements, it fails to convince. It fails because when I am told that a pending decision or course of action is already predetermined, I have a knowledge more immediate than other kinds of knowledge can ever be that it is not so. If anyone thinks that observation of my past conduct, or any other knowledge he can have about me, would enable an infallible prediction of any decision or any action in given circumstances, those given circumstances must include the all-important one that the prediction is carefully concealed from me. If I know it I can, and probably shall, within limits falsify it. The success of the method will always depend upon ignoring self-conscious mind and treating me as an automaton. But to ignore the self-conscious mind in man is to ignore the most significant thing about him and the essential element in personality.

Man is not thus to be accounted for. It is vain to seek an adequate knowledge of man without primary attention to all that *differentiates* him from the inanimate world and from the animal creation. In

<sup>1</sup> *The Function of Reason*, p. 12.

the evolutionary process higher stages imply much more than the beginnings: in the later stages there are qualities which cannot be accounted for from the sole consideration of earlier stages. Morality and religion arise from the activities of the highly complex and organized life and mind of man; and as this distinctive spiritual being is not the mere aggregate of the less highly organized constituents into which his nature may by analysis be broken up, it follows that no considerations derived from those simpler and lower elements are relevant as arguments against the validity of man's insights, his morality and his religion. There is nothing but prejudice to justify a preference for attempts to understand man in terms of lower categories rather than those which his own personality bears and brings to light, nor is the initial prejudice justified by any explanatory results.

## CHAPTER II

### SIN, FORGIVENESS AND GRACE

**I**N the preceding lecture we have considered in outline what human personality is and may reasonably be maintained to be. The reality of that status of personality is fundamental in any Christian doctrine of man. The other elements which have been and must needs be central in this Christian doctrine are the facts of human sin and the experience of salvation, that is, of forgiveness and grace, and their interpretation.

These facts of experience have been interpreted, as we all know, in the light of a traditional anthropology, based upon the early narrative of the Fall in the book of Genesis, accepted as revealed truth. We now know that that ancient story did not originate as ready-made information oracularly conveyed to man whose only interest was to receive it. In the form in which we have it the story dates from a time subsequent to the exalted monotheism and lofty moral teaching of the great prophets of Israel. At first, and for long centuries afterwards, the story was not regarded as an explanation of realized sinfulness and of a conse-

quent sense of alienation from God; it was rather an explanation of the physical struggles of life, its trials and its hardships, of the fact that life is not lived in a Paradise whose ways are pleasantness and its paths peace. We know the story to be myth—an attempt to account for facts when the knowledge requisite for explanation was scanty. It is strange, but nevertheless a fact, that the famous story in Genesis iii influenced neither the theology nor the anthropology of the Old Testament, which contains no reference to it. The Old Testament, like Jesus, was concerned with the fact of sin, which was not considered mysterious, rather than with any theories of the origin of sin. Nor was the Genesis story appealed to as an explanation of human suffering: the classical treatment of that problem in the book of Job goes far to repudiate the idea of causal or retributive connection between sin and suffering. The only ‘sin’ of which Job repents is the overboldness of his attempt to comprehend God’s dealings with him; in other words, his ‘sin’ was a more advanced form of that same attempt to know and understand which, according to Genesis, led to man’s first disobedience.<sup>1</sup>

The main lines of the historical Christian conception of man were laid by St. Paul and fixed by St. Augustine. The real origin of what they wrote was in their own experience—in those intense and all-absorbing inward conflicts characteristic of those whom William

<sup>1</sup> The chief duty of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, says Dr. N. P. Williams, was to be ignorant, and the myth illustrates the maxim, “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.” The same theme appears in the story of the Tower of Babel.

James called 'the twice-born'. St. Paul accepted the Genesis story of Adam's sin as fact; and it came to be accepted not only as fact, but as the explanation of the inward moral struggle and of the strength of the passions, with which originally the story was not concerned. But the great passages in the Epistle to the Romans which deal with this question had very little influence in the early Church. The writer of 2 Peter recognizes in St. Paul's epistles 'things hard to be understood, which the ignorant and unstedfast wrest'; but it was not until the text of Romans was made the basis of systematic comment and exposition that the significance of the passages dealing with human sin was realized. Pelagius' appeal to tradition as supporting his superficial doctrine was both natural and largely justified; while the great importance of St. Augustine in this respect is that he had no predecessor and has had no very original successor as an interpreter of St. Paul. Even now it is difficult to understand St. Paul's doctrine of human nature and of sin except as it comes to us through the mind of St. Augustine. It is true that the great African theologian's extreme views of the total depravity of human nature owing to the transmission of the supposedly corrupted seed of Adam, and the shocking implications which he drew from this horrible doctrine have never been fully or officially accepted by the Catholic Church as a whole;<sup>1</sup> this fact, however,

<sup>1</sup> This unenviable distinction belongs to certain Protestant sects, and it has been often characteristic of Evangelical theology.



though to some people it may make their rejection easier, does not neutralize their historic effects. •

If we ignore the extreme conclusions to which St. Augustine was led in his interpretation of St. Paul and of the Genesis story, there can yet be no doubt that he saw more deeply into human nature and took a wiser measure of its clamorous instincts and passions, with their great power of prompting to sin, than the Pelagians did. If there was ever any doubt on this point, modern psychology has removed it. Compared with the Augustinian, the Pelagian psychology is superficial. So much ought to be granted. But equally important is the fact that we cannot suppose the experiences of St. Paul and St. Augustine not to have been to some extent conditioned by what, on the basis of Genesis, they believed about the origin of sin.

Thus the ceaseless inward struggle between the ideal on the one hand and instinct and appetite on the other hand, came to be regarded as contrary to the Divine intention—the result of sin and itself exceeding sinful. Man, it was supposed, by reason of organic descent from Adam, could justly be held responsible for his instincts and passional appetites: merely to possess them, apart from what man did about them, was sin. It is clear that, without any belief in the primal innocence and deliberate first sin of man and the supposed consequences, the experience of inner conflict may be just as intense, the victory of impulse over ideal just as crushing, and the sense of

helplessness and craving for deliverance just as overwhelming and imperative, but these facts of experience would not necessarily, or indeed naturally, be interpreted as they were in the prevailing Christian tradition. In particular, the inner conflict would not naturally be regarded as evidence of sinfulness. The emphasis would be placed elsewhere and would be qualitatively different; and emphasis and quality are most important in the moral and spiritual life.

It was noted above that the Old Testament nowhere appeals or even refers to the Genesis Eden story as affording an explanation either of sin or of suffering. The fact, as is emphasized in Dr. N. P. Williams' brilliant Bampton Lectures on *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, is that Genesis iii contains no idea of original sin and, as a matter of history, was not the source of that idea or of the doctrine of the Fall. The historical fact is that these doctrines only arose in late Judaism as the result of reflection upon realized sinfulness. It was then, and not before, that the Eden story was appealed to as confirming and explaining what experience had suggested. It was not the only story to which appeal was made; an alternative explanation was found in Genesis vi, in the primitive tale of unnatural unions between 'the sons of God' and the daughters of men. Two conclusions of importance for our subject therefore follow from modern Biblical knowledge. One is that, however much the Christian doctrines of man and of sin have been coloured by St. Paul's and St. Augustine's

acceptance of the Eden story as historical fact and by the interpretations they placed upon it, neither the story nor their interpretations were the source of the belief in man's sinfulness or in his need of redemption. It is therefore nonsense to say that the whole basis of the Christian doctrine upon these subjects is destroyed because we now know that Genesis iii is myth and not historical fact. The experience of sinfulness, from which reflection started, is still a genuine experience. The mingling of good and evil, alike in motives and in actions, is a grave reality. It is not seriously affected because the Fall-doctrine, which was in origin conjectural inference drawn to explain the obscure cause of the genuine experience, has become for us a superfluous and a false inference. The second and related conclusion is that the Eden story and deductions from it have no place in any modern Christian anthropology. Adam's transgression, as Dr. Wheeler Robinson bluntly says,<sup>1</sup> is removed from the data of the problem.

The influence of the Fall-doctrine upon the Christian conception of man has been immense and of that subtle kind of which the more obvious affords no adequate measure. It still colours much of the language of penitence and thereby fosters the dispositions of the soul from the beginnings of the religious life. That no place for a Fall or for anything resembling it can be found within the known history of man is now

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, third edition, p. 269.

recognized. But that is not enough: the consequent and necessary adjustments should be made if a right estimate of sin and a true doctrine of man are to be attained. It is therefore the more to be regretted that the learned Bampton Lectures to which I have already referred, the work of a theologian who combines unusual acuteness of mind with a full acceptance of modern methods in Biblical study, should have made an attempt to reinstate the doctrine of the Fall, in a form which, if true, would seem to increase its fundamental importance. He advocates a theory of a pre-human, transcendental, or pre-cosmic Fall.<sup>1</sup> He sees the Stoic conception of the 'seminal reason' reappearing in a modern biological form in Bergson's *élan vital*, and uses this conception though with an important difference. For him it is the World-Soul, 'the only begotten Universe' of Plato's *Timaeus*. It was created 'the image of its Maker, most mighty and good, most fair and perfect', 'free, personal and self-conscious.' Then

at the beginning of Time, in some transcendental and incomprehensible manner, it turned away from God in the direction of self, thus shattering its own interior being . . . and thereby forfeiting its unitary self-consciousness, which it has only regained, after years of myopic striving, in sporadic fragments which are the separate minds of men and perhaps of superhuman spirits.

<sup>1</sup> *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, pp. 522 ff. I must not be understood to suggest that the author defends the Augustinian conception of 'original guilt'. His repudiation of the more terrible features of Augustinianism is explicit, and he shows that the Church generally has never committed herself to them.

This is the Fall, by which creation with all its forms of life, 'from the bacillus up to man', became apostate; this explains the struggle and pain to which Evolution everywhere testifies, and also that inherited infirmity of will on account of which we so often cannot do the things that we would.

In its historic form, as we have already noticed, the Fall-doctrine did not arise from the interpretation of historical facts. Arising as an inference from the experience of sinfulness, it subsequently found a historical basis in the Genesis story accepted as actual events. Driven from the world of fact, this extraordinary theory of a pre-mundane Fall would find a basis for the old doctrine in the realm of fancy. We are asked to believe that God's original creation was vitiated by sin before ever the evolutionary process began. The only creation of which we have any knowledge whatever is the world characterized by an evolutionary process; and nothing known suggests that that process, conscious sin and its consequences apart, might or ought to have been other than it is.

The pre-mundane Fall-theory would have us regard the whole process of evolution as the difficult and gradual recovery from an earlier corruption, for which there is not a tittle of evidence. We must first suppose the alleged free, personal, self-conscious World-Soul to have suffered the complete disintegration of those attributes, and thereafter so to have remained for countless ages before there was any sign of returning consciousness, despite the continual succour of the

Logos<sup>1</sup> The theory is put forward as the best that can be done towards a solution of the mystery of evil, but it does nothing to remove or even reduce that main difficulty for ethical Theism. In the modern world, if belief in God can only be justified on the basis of a pre-mundane transcendental 'Fall', it will not long be maintained at all. It is a popular reproach against Theology as a science that, unlike other sciences, it has to begin by proving the existence of its subject-matter, God. If this is only possible by the initial imagination of an ideal creation, utterly different from the actual world which alone we know, it will inevitably become impossible. Nor is anything explained by such a feat of imagination.

The presence of sin and suffering in an evolutionary process of struggle and progress from rudimentary beginnings is understandable, if not free from difficulties for ethical Theism: their origin in a perfect personal self-consciousness enjoying the fullness of the vision of God, unhampered by any instincts and passions inherited from an evolutionary past, is utterly inexplicable. Why should such a glorious image of God turn from its Creator? That any temptation could arise, or possess the least seductive power, presupposes precisely that defect already existing in the World-Soul for which its sin is supposed to be responsible in man. To avoid an infinite

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Williams speaks of "the patiently working, healing, and refining influences" of the Divine Logos, "sustaining the blinded Life-Force, which otherwise would have lapsed into nothingness." *Op. cit.*, p. 529.

regress, Dr. Williams would account for the World-Soul's turning away from God as due to "some uncaused cause, lying within its own being." Thus would courageous assertion resolve mystery. If there is another 'uncaused cause' besides God we must acknowledge an ultimate dualism; unless, indeed, it be freedom, and unless the essence of personal sinfulness is that it can have no other efficient cause than personal freedom, in which case no pre-mundane Fall-theory is required to account for human sinfulness. Such a baseless speculation as that of a pre-mundane 'Fall' can have no place in a constructive doctrine of man which would ground itself upon what can reasonably be called knowledge.

The data of biological evolution have shown that the apes and man represent variations from an earlier common stock. The only God in Whom we have any grounds for believing is the God Who is achieving His purposes by the methods which Evolution discloses, Who is Himself the world-Ground. This remains true on any view of Divine revelation, even that which may come through Divine Incarnation. It is only by means of what can be made known to us in and through the one world we know, and through what is possible within it, that we know anything at all, even of God. A different world would imply a different God. The lusting of the flesh against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, of which St. Paul speaks, is a painful fact, but it is not necessarily evidence of a

disease existing in human nature contrary to the Divine will.<sup>1</sup> The earliest being who could be recognized as human was above all else a creature of instincts, impulses and passions, much stronger than those we know now. His very survival had depended upon them. They were the inevitable accompaniment of that evolutionary process which we must needs regard as existing by the will of God. Types of action which, from the point of view of developed morality, would be sinful, were not committed by primitive men who were aware of them as wicked. Further, it is an impossible assumption that primitive man, terribly handicapped as he was, had the power to actualize in his behaviour, without any failures, his first glimpses of better things. As was said long ago, the first sin, if we can imagine it at all, "instead of being the greatest and most momentous, would be the least significant of all."

What is true of primitive man is true of each human creature as he begins his earthly pilgrimage. The child inherits an ancestral and parental heritage: he is handicapped in his earthly race. He will be in large measure determined by the particular body he in-

<sup>1</sup> Nor has Catholic theology, in spite of great reverence for Augustine, so regarded it. It holds that the inner conflict is natural to man as God made him, and not a result of the Fall. It also teaches that, as created by God, man was endowed, by the unmerited gift of God and in addition to his natural endowments, with supernatural grace sufficient to have enabled him to cope successfully with the inner conflict: it was this unmerited grace which man forfeited by the Fall. There is no reason why we should not believe this except that there is no reason why we should.



herits, by the appetites, impulses, attractions and repulsions, the emotional responses, which his body and his social environment will mediate to him long before he can understand them. The child thus comes to have an individuality and a temperament long before he attains the status of a moral person. When he does reach that status, he will know himself to be impelled to certain lines of conduct and hindered in his pursuit of others. This state of affairs theology has called 'concupiscence' and often wrongly regarded as 'original sin'. For this nature is ours because of our social descent, ultimately a descent from sub-human ancestry. It requires no hypothesis of a fall from innocence to explain it, nor can we be regarded as responsible for it. The solidarity of the human race is a truth, but it must not be so interpreted as to mean that the individual is accountable for what happened before his earthly life begins; and that for which we may not justly be held accountable is not sin. Psychology confirms biology and reveals man's natural appetites and impulses as neither good nor evil, but potentially important for either and for both. Neither sin nor moral goodness arises in them, but in the use we make of them. They are the raw material of virtue as much as of vice: they may be a savour of life unto life or of death unto death.

The word sin is seldom used strictly, and endless confusion results. Sin is the breach of, or the failure to attain, a standard or ideal of conduct both known and approved. Sin cannot exist in the individual

prior to the attainment of the moral consciousness, until the individual can both will and choose between ends which are regarded as higher and lower. So far as we are determined by anything of which it cannot be said that we *ought* to control and direct it, our action is not the result of choice or volition at all. It cannot be estimated in terms of morality as either good or evil: it is non-moral.

It is one of the commonest charges against a form of Christianity which frankly accepts modern knowledge about man that its conception of sin is superficial and deficient. It may be that strong reaction against the exaggerations which have accompanied the Fall-doctrine has resulted in statements which have been justly open to the criticism mentioned. Yet the evolutionary view of the world, and its consequences, certainly afford no grounds for any superficiality about sin. It is no argument against the truth or the adequacy of facts that they are not immune from shallow interpretations. Pelagianism, or any other easy-going optimism about human nature and human sin,<sup>1</sup> gets little support from modern knowledge when it is careful to take account of all the facts and not only of some of them; while the fact that the difference between the ancient and the modern Christian world-views can be more easily minimized

<sup>1</sup> Pelagius denied the Fall, not because he found no evidence for it, but because of his premise that man was not in utter need of grace. As Dr. Tennant points out in his Hulsean Lectures on *The Origin and Propagation of Sin*, modern denial of the Fall does not involve the deduction of the Pelagian premise.

than exaggerated often means that when there are points of resemblance between inferences from modern knowledge and ancient heresy the resemblance has little serious meaning.

So far as I know, no one has more truly emphasized the importance of those facts of Evolution which have a bearing upon the nature of sin than Dr. John Oman;<sup>1</sup> so I take leave to draw attention to his teaching in a summary which I trust will not, by its brevity, misrepresent. He points out that the various familiar descriptions of man as compared with the animal creation have a common factor, namely, that man has never accepted his environment in the same way as other animals. It was to his inability to accept his environment contentedly that man owed the fact that he was not wholly at the mercy of his experiences, but was able to gain a footing amid their flux. Evolution has been marked not only by change: there has been a *continuity of direction*, the more remarkable because of the terrible wastage and retrogression which have accompanied it. It was out of this imperative direction that the unbridgeable distinction between good and evil arose. Human advance has always come through venture on a higher environment, and the venture can never be reversed, or for long remain stationary, without disaster.<sup>2</sup> It is everywhere neces-

<sup>1</sup> See *The Natural and the Supernatural*.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Oman mentions as an analogy that a form of life may originate in water, leave it and eventually learn to live and fly in the air; but if it returns to the water it does not become a fish but a corpse.

sary courageously to maintain what has with difficulty been attained, on pain of retrogression and ultimate disappearance. Thus the turning of a deaf ear to the call of the higher is always a serious crisis and never a mere deficiency. Herein lies the seriousness of sin, the deliberate rejection of or the failure to reach a standard recognized and approved.

Again, after moral action, the memory of the freedom exercised enables a man to see the action as deliberate, and the experience and consequences of good acts force him to regard bad ones as peculiarly his own responsibility. This consciousness of accountability, responsibility, imputability, is a fact of psychology which cannot be reduced to any other category: only a bottomless scepticism, which by its own nature has no right to pass such a judgment, can pronounce it an illusion. It is perhaps the strongest evidence of the unity and continuity of self-consciousness. Further, as moral insight increases, the sense of responsibility for failure and sin becomes more acute and, curiously at first sight, more acute than the sense of responsibility for good actions.

The reason for this is that 'what ought to be' is never something that we manufacture; it is always, as it were, *given*, waiting to be recognized and attained. The higher environment is always in front of our response to it, making advance possible though never inevitable.<sup>1</sup> That is why to abandon the doctrine of

<sup>1</sup> J. Oman, *Vision and Authority*, p. 28: "Evolution explains the mixture of the base in us by the way we have come, it cannot explain the high and holy except by the way we are yet to go."

Grace is to abandon what is vital to religion and to progress therein. It is also the reason why every sin is a sin against 'the whole law', and why sin, as an attitude of willing, is not merely the number of transgressions which are its symptoms and results. It also explains why the conviction of sin is all the stronger in those men of God in whose lives, to the external observer on a lower level, there is very little sin. The sense of the sinfulness of sin increases with the knowledge of God and of ourselves in the light of that knowledge.

The existence of the inner conflict, our failures and our sins, are the real and sufficient basis of man's need of forgiveness and of the grace of God. If the reality of these needs be not adequately grounded in our human experience, it certainly cannot be adequately grounded on theories about the origin and growth of sin which purport to account for our experience. Sin is not an inherited psychological or pathological condition, though it is patently true that persistence in sin may result in psychological derangement and physical disaster. Whatever man's racial history, his moral history, as Dr. Tennant says, begins with himself. We may not properly speak of the transmission of sin by our inheritance and propagation of a depraved birth-nature. On the other hand, the individual is powerfully affected, alike in the ideals he adopts and in his motives, by the social environment in which he grows up. The moral atmosphere of that social environment is indeed most

seriously affected and permeated by human sin and thus prompts the individual to sin, In this sense there is a transmission of sin by which the young are affected and harmed before they reach the status of full self-conscious moral personality. Thus individual sin begets social sins which in turn foster individual sin. But it is in this present life, and therein only (so far as we know), that *sin* enters into the stuff of our nature.

Man is not responsible for his inherited instincts and passions, nor for his early and often not wholly for his later environment, all of which determine the initial exercise of his freedom and to a large extent its limits. These facts do nothing whatever to reduce the sinfulness of sin or the urgency of dealing with it, but they do seem to reduce *the sense of the all-pervadingness of sin*. Now in any case the universality of sin is not a fact: those who are not yet morally conscious persons are exceptions to it. Nor is its alleged all-pervadingness a fact: there is a vast amount of goodness, both within and without the consciously accepted inspiration of religion, wherever men exist. There is no more need to infer an inherited tendency towards evil to account for sin than there is to infer an inherited tendency to good to explain the goodness. Both sin and goodness result, and can only result, from that freedom which is an essential factor in spiritual personality. In due course we do all sin, but because of the very nature of sin itself it is impossible to find any *cause* for this fact more ultimate than

personal freedom. If we do find any such cause we thereby, as Dr. Wheeler Robinson says, make moral evil a necessary element in personality and rob it of its moral quality and of its religious condemnation.

The Christian religion has been of highest importance in awakening men's minds to the reality of personality and in the development of the conception of it. None the less, any attempt to combine Evolutionary ideas with Fall-ideas merely obscures the significance of the former which destroy the meaning of the latter. In a similar way the Fall-background of the doctrine of man has obscured the implications of the doctrine of the Incarnation which, if it be justified as an affirmation of faith,<sup>1</sup> are both real and significant. The Incarnation doctrine immeasurably enriched the doctrine of God, and it has received continuous study as an interpretation of the person of Christ; but its bearing upon the doctrine of man has been undervalued. Orthodoxy has always affirmed that Jesus was truly and fully man. True manhood, it follows, is thus capable of being the vehicle of God's supreme manifestation; for there is no reason to suppose, nor does orthodoxy require us to believe, that Jesus' moral excellence was the miraculous achievement of God overcoming every temptation by means not available to other men. The doctrine of the Incarnation, in any form which it can reasonably

<sup>1</sup> It is hardly necessary to observe that only so can the doctrine be justified: there cannot be any logical compulsion to belief in it.

assume in the modern world, proclaims that man's nature is potentially what the manhood of Jesus was; and one of the purposes of the Incarnation is to make it possible for man "to grow up into him in all things". He and his human life, while revealing no penitence, evoke human penitence. In him may be seen what man ought to be, and what he actually is and is not.

The positive Christian ideal thus manifested, like the inferences from the facts of evolution, will never allow any superficial conceptions of sin. This Christian ideal tolerates neither whittling away nor reduction of our sense of responsibility and shame for deliberate sin or for those defeats by instinct and passion to which the will seems only to consent when through weakness it is overcome. The ideal of Christ will always convict of sin, and in his light we cannot accept any cloak for our sin. A true appreciation of the nature of sin can only come as the vision of God and awareness of His demands upon us increase; but the same ideal which convicts us also gives the hope of redemption and of ultimate victory. What is important is not any discussion in the abstract about the possibility of Christ's ideal being attainable, but rather that the ideal, once seen, becomes the higher environment which must be kept in sight and upon which we must venture as the essential condition of advance. Its eclipse means degeneration.

A doctrine of man which omits all idea of a Fall and of its implications, and grounds itself upon known facts and reasonable inferences from them as



affording the only reliable basis on which our inner experience can be interpreted, can claim to be fully consistent with the teaching of Jesus and to be in the fullest sense Christian. The Synoptic gospels contain no hint that Jesus held anything resembling the later ecclesiastical doctrine of man's nature. He certainly neither minimized nor ignored the fact of sin or its seriousness. His earliest message was a call to repentance, and he suggested no limits to the need of it: the references to the ninety-and-nine who need it not cannot be other than ironical. Evil proceeds from within, out of the heart of man; but, to quote Dr. N. P. Williams:

affirmations that this evil tendency or quality is transmitted by physiological heredity, and is ultimately derived from a primordial transgression—affirmations which we have seen to be necessary constituents of a Fall-doctrine—are conspicuous by their absence.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus taught nothing about the ultimate origin of sin, and he seems to have attributed evil rather to the external tempting activities of the devil than to an inherent corruption of human nature.

In his admirable work entitled *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, Dr. Wheeler Robinson refers to sin as needing freedom to explain it and grace to save from it. There can be no doubt that throughout the Bible it is held that it is to God that man must look

<sup>1</sup> *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, p. 97.

for the fulfilment of his destiny. If I were setting forth the Christian doctrine of man's salvation it would be necessary at this point to treat of the theme of Atonement which has taken so large a place in Christian teaching, but as my concern is but with some aspects of the doctrine of man I do no more than offer some reflections upon the associated ideas of forgiveness and of grace as being reasonable in themselves and as meeting man's need if his true destiny is to be realized.

The doctrine of forgiveness is often said to be unethical on the ground that sin cannot be done away. Man must bear the weight of responsibility for his sin, whatever the consequences. The removal of guilt is regarded as a violation of freedom and therefore of personality, a worse evil than the bearing of guilt. We have seen that responsibility for our actions remains; and human life is largely what it is because the consequences of sin are what they are. The essential thing to remember about the Christian doctrine of forgiveness is that it does not profess to wipe out the consequences of sin except by removing their causes. Its purpose is to enable men to accept those consequences in a new light and in a new spirit, and in so doing to rise above sins and consequences alike. Forgiveness may avoid some consequences of unforgiven sin, for two reasons; first because the consequences of remaining in an unforgiven state are cumulative, and secondly because, in the forgiven state, the very results of sin become the occasions of

goodness: forgiveness enables us to deal with them rightly, and in so doing, and in helping one another's infirmities, good both can be and is brought out of evil. It is only while we are unforgiven that we concern ourselves with escaping sin's consequences. It is one of the main purposes of forgiveness to set us free from all such evasion and its paralysing effects. Forgiveness itself does the work of punishment. It is, as Dr. Clement Webb has said, not by the intention of the forgiver, but by the awakened conscience of the person forgiven, that coals of fire are heaped upon his head.

It is forgiveness alone which makes true progress possible and thus assists the growth of man's nature towards its highest possibilities. To be awakened to what is really demanded of us is to recognize that we cannot rise to it. Worse, past failures, sins and their consequences, have made us less able to rise to what we ought to be than we might otherwise have been able to do. The position is that we are unprofitable servants, we must for ever so remain and inevitably become more so, unless we reduce the ideal to the standard we can realize. There is a menace of defeat rather than a promise of victory. This either hampers us to a degree which results in self-centredness, or else drives us to find relief and peace in insincerity and insensitiveness, and the acceptance of conventional standards. It is this deep need that forgiveness and grace alone can meet. They meet it, not by pretending that our condition is other than it is, or by any easy

condoning of it: they do not act either impersonally or unethically, nor ever enable us to vanquish evil as easily as we yield to it. They confer an insight, true insight, as to our real place in a world that is God's and in His family. Forgiveness transforms the world in which, with damaged sight, we have been living in sin, into the true world in which there is fellowship with God and in which all things consistent with righteousness and love are possible. If thereby the way is opened to deliverance from domination by sins 'which live only in the dark', this is not the result of some kind of unethical or sub-personal change in the self, but by conscious insight into the gracious goodness of God. Thus the ideals of the moral life are rendered attainable, with the possibility of new insights always open and insight itself inspired, as they never can be so long as persons are held to be in a merely legal relation to impersonal laws.

It may further be urged that the doctrine of grace, so far from being a limitation of that human freedom which is essential to moral advance, is in fact not only the Divine response to man's deep need, but also guarantees his freedom and secures his true moral independence. Man's recognition of the high and increasing demands of the moral law is one thing: the degree of his ability or inability to fulfil them is another: the consequences of his inability are yet another. The most exacting moral demand is that we ought to judge moral issues with an ever-increasing

conscientiousness.<sup>1</sup> But is man able to actualize every ideal, and is it enough to prescribe 'You can because you ought'? Experience abundantly shows that the prescription is likely to be reversed so as to mean 'You ought not when you cannot'. Then the result is contentment with easy-going and conventional standards, with the consequences of moral stagnation and deterioration. It is, indeed, only if man may depend on a reality stronger than himself, which is not only reflected in his conscience but also works with him, that he will be both inspired and able to judge morally with an ever more penetrating conscientiousness. This is the meaning of man's need of and dependence upon grace.

So long as man thinks and tries to act as though he stands in isolated independence facing the demands of an impersonal moral law, one of two results will occur; and both of them are, in the long run, fatal to the highest and most progressive morality. A man may have a moderate or low conception of what is required of him morally, or it may be that, whether his idea of the moral law be moderate or exalted, his self-criticism in the light of it is superficial. In those circumstances his moral condition will rank accordingly: he will become more or less self-satisfied. "All these things have I kept." He will not easily be moved to add "What lack I yet?", and will certainly not continue to do so indefinitely. On the other hand, a

<sup>1</sup> See on this point Dr. K. E. Kirk's *The Threshold of Ethics*, pp. 144 ff.

man's awareness of the moral law's demands may be very keen and his self-criticism rigorous. Then he will also feel keenly his inability to rise to all that is demanded, and will recognize that his inability has been increased by past failures. He will thus feel himself threatened by continual defeat leading to despair, unless in self-defence he reverts to the low level at which the implications of 'I ought' are decided by what 'I can'. If he does this his moral independence will not be maintained, certainly not increased: he will come to depend upon conventional standards.

Now self-satisfaction and despair are alike self-centred: they rob moral life of that disinterestedness which is its finest virtue and grace,<sup>1</sup> and they undermine the independence or freedom which is morally essential. The true independence is that born of dependence on a reality greater than the personal self; this alone will ever call and lead us on, and is the real life-principle of growth in man's moral consciousness and moral attainment. This dependence is not unethical because the reality itself is not alien to though it transcends man's moral conscience, and also because that reality cannot be known or depended upon except by our own insight. The only reason for

<sup>1</sup> I may perhaps refer, in relation to all that is said on these points, to my essay on 'Ethics and Religion' in *Personal Ethics*, edited by K. E. Kirk (Oxford University Press). See further, particularly on the important theme that the life of worship alone guarantees humility and self-forgetfulness, Dr. Kirk's Bampton Lectures, entitled *The Vision of God*, chapter viii.

such dependence is the reason why we ought to be dependent and in fact are so.

Dr. Wheeler Robinson does well to emphasize that the supremacy of personality over the facts of the temporal and spatial order of existence points to some higher realm for its own explanation, and that at this point the Christian doctrine of grace presents itself as an answer to the problems of our thought and meets the demands of our life. It brings the individual into relations with an eternal order, in which the individual person is an end in himself though never only for himself. It must, of course, always be remembered that the assistance of the grace of God is nothing other and nothing less than a *personal relation* to God. As such it no more interferes with the proper demand of morality for freedom than do the supports and encouragements which come to us all through human personal and social relationships. For grace cannot incline and move our willing except through our willing consent. Its purpose is to give the needed freedom to do as we ought to do: it is a personal relation inclusive of God and man, never something imposed by God's superior power or received through our *blind* submission. It can only be made effective by the constraining power of love, which is no more at variance with human freedom than is the constraining power of the imperatives of moral demands. It is an inadequate anthropology which ignores the essential implications of the moral and personal nature of man, and overlooks the fact that the relationship of God to

man is a *personal* relationship, leading to mechanical ideas of grace and of its operations and to consequent superstitions.<sup>1</sup>

Christian doctrine has maintained that man cannot, of his own unaided free-will, turn to God or merit His grace. This proposition is not false, but it is hypothetical and abstract, because man is never really in the position implied. He is always in a world of which God is the Ground and the Creator. Actually man is never wholly outside the scope of Divine grace. Goodness is never wholly absent and where goodness remains there is grace. The realization of this, and the recognition that all our goodness, everything in life, even life itself, are simply God's goodness to us, is the essence of Christian faith and life. The refusal of this position (not so much a theoretical refusal, but) in practice—that is, the ignoring of the responsibility involved—is the essence of sin. It places us in a false position, blinds us to God's judgments and limits moral and spiritual growth. Just as God's grace is but His active love towards us and gives us true freedom in a true relation to Him, so when we use life and the world for ends which are not His our freedom diminishes. True freedom is actualized as we learn to love and to take our true position in the human family of God; and the essence of the Christian gospel is that, whatever man does and however low he may fall, the presence of Divine love never forsakes

<sup>1</sup> On the whole subject of Grace, see John Oman's invaluable little book *Grace and Personality*.



him. As it is immeasurably greater than human goodness, so it is immeasurably stronger than human sin; and stronger than death.

It is in this matter that Christianity is opposed to and cannot make terms with modern Humanism. What is true in Humanism finds its place in Christianity, but it will not survive the removal of its Christian basis, which is a doctrine of man's nature and destiny, the whole meaning of which is not confined to the seen and temporal world. Canon Barry truly says that if we make man the measure of all things it leads to a loss of faith in man: it is 'spiritual treason', in one sense the ultimate sin man's nature can commit, because it denies the truth about his own nature. Christianity can always believe in man, while taking full measure of the worst about him, because it believes that God is ever raising man to be His child and making him more and more after His own likeness.

The modern setting in which the doctrine of man must be formulated, at one and the same time increases the sense of human responsibility and, at first sight, of man's insignificance. But the status, meaning and value of personality are not reduced because it has a place in the evolutionary order. From one aspect of the facts the value of man's short span of life and his puny contributions within so vast a scheme may appear trivial; the way in which any Divine purposes will be realized or how good will

triumph are so obscure, and man's personal share therein so nearly unimaginable, that often he can be sustained only by the religious self-committal in faith to the Divine grace, which always prevents and follows him. Again, human life is a conflict and, though it contains much that is good and of worth, it is almost as hard to maintain what has been won as it is to win more; only with difficulty do reasonableness and morality, with their crown of personal love, hold their own. Powerful elemental forces seem always near and ready to sweep our gains away. But equally it is beyond doubt that the creative process has tended towards the production of these treasures and made it possible for us to gain them. Man, though by no means in a steady line of unbroken progress, has slowly gained in moral status and spiritual insight and achievement. The inevitable conflicts, more particularly the conflict between instinctive passions and the developing sense of 'what ought to be', so far from being sinful and evil, have been and are by the grace of God the means of man's advance.

There is at least solid ground for the necessary self-committal on man's part, and for trusting that all the resources of God operative in the evolutionary process encompass the man who desires and tries to realize its best treasures. The supremely necessary religious trust that God is really beforehand with us in every motion we make towards goodness—and this is the heart of the doctrine of grace—so far from being superfluous is really demanded in an evolutionary

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world; but it will not be evoked or encouraged by attempts to restate doctrines about human nature which are not consonant with known facts. These facts are pregnant with all that is profound in the Augustinian thought of man's dependence upon God; but attempts to reproduce Augustinian conceptions of sin and human nature, or to restore the truly religious attitude by the revival of a modified Calvinism, though they may have a temporary success, will be followed by disastrous reactions. The revolutions in knowledge and in the consequent thought of our age have a deadening or devastating effect upon those who see no sure foothold or who become alarmed because the masses of mankind do not at once respond to necessary restatements of religious belief. Short cuts to 'faith' on the one hand, and on the other hand wild experiments in moral life uncontrolled by any knowledge of or regard for the dearly purchased wisdom of the past, prove irresistible or attractive according to temperament. The former will have no permanence and the latter are more likely to lead to bitter disappointment and disillusionment than to useful discovery.

Human nature has frequently to relearn even its own deepest needs. A long history exists to warn and teach us that nothing worth while is attainable without stern discipline and exacting effort; but we may also know by the testimony of our own spirit that what we most desire is no less our own than it is the Divine ideal for us. We know both too much and too

little of human nature lightly to assume that changes in man's moral standards are for the better because, from the very limited standpoint of the present moment, they may seem to be onward steps in evolutionary advance. The true character of those periods of human history which historical review pronounces retrogressive was often hidden from those who lived in them. The later and the better are not interchangeable terms; and at the personal level the only sure ground of confidence that there will be progress from good to better is the conviction that the whole process is grounded in a Mind not Himself a product of it, and that personal life is akin to the Mind who guides the whole. "The fact of religious vision", writes Dr. Whitehead,

and its history of persistent expansion, is our one ground for optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience.<sup>1</sup>

No doctrine of man, however faithfully derived from inner experience and interpreted in relation to other knowledge, can be complete or Christian if it ignores the future. Scientific prediction may not be knowledge, but for what it is worth it confirms the old Christian doctrine that the present temporal world will not endlessly continue to produce higher and higher values: the things concerning it have an end. The following passage indicates the future of our earthly home as science predicts it:

<sup>1</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, p. 275.

Everything points with overwhelming force to a definite event, or series of events, of creation at some time or times, not infinitely remote. The Universe cannot have originated by chance out of its present ingredients, and neither can it have been always the same as now. For in either of those events no atoms would be left save such as are incapable of dissolving into radiation; there would be neither sunlight nor starlight, but only a cool glow of radiation uniformly diffused through space. This is indeed, so far as present-day science can see, the final end to which all creation moves, and at which it must at long last arrive.<sup>1</sup>

Even if an alternative speculation that a diffused radiation will not be the end, but that another evolutionary process will supervene, should be correct, the present human race and all its temporal values are in no wise affected or rescued from ultimate frustration.

It is, after all, the same problem, on the universal scale, as that presented by the death of the individual person. Religious faith is that there is an unseen but real, eternal and spiritual world ultimately independent of, however closely connected with, the temporal order which we see and partly understand; if it be not so, then it seems that all human aspirations and values are but for a time, and are really but names for ideals doomed in the end to be fruitless. But religious faith, and Christian faith, do not imply any turning away from the evolutionary view of man and his nature: they give it meaning, and the only permanent signifi-

<sup>1</sup> Sir. J. H. Jeans, *Eos, or The Wider Aspects of Cosmogony*, p. 55. See also chapter vi in the same author's *The Universe Around Us*. Cf. chapter iv in Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*.

cance it can have. Nor is there anything with the smallest claim to the status of knowledge which forbids to this faith the title of reasonable faith. The Christian faith does not look for its final consummation on earth; and no estimation of man can be other than a vain dream if it ignores the obvious fact that here he has no continuing city. The true valuation of the world and of human life in the world can only be made against the background of their transience; but for the Christian they are transient not in the sense that they are simply to perish as though they had never been, but in the sense that they are the transient means to the attainment of a greater, enduring spiritual reality. Man's business is with life in the actual world in which he is set, but without a vision of his own nature and destiny which transcends that life, he lacks the inspiration to find an ultimately satisfying meaning either in his struggles or in his achievements.

### CHAPTER III

### CONCERNING GOD

**O**F PEOPLE who have living belief in God there are few if there are any who first attained to it by conscious reasoning. As in the past, so in the future, only very seldom if at all will men come to lay hold of or appreciate the meaning of the fundamental affirmations of the Christian religion prior to experience of its power. Reasoning may remove or reduce the stumbling-blocks and misunderstandings which obstruct the way to the venture of faith in God, but it cannot logically compel the affirmation of faith. Official Roman Catholic theology holds that God's existence can be proved by the unaided light of human reason; but to the vast majority of other philosophers the 'proofs' adduced seem to depend upon an *a priori* identification of ideas in our minds with existence outside them, and to issue in a natural theology which is little more than the logical extraction of what is already assumed in the premisses, or the setting forth of foregone conclusions. Reasoning may conduct to a point at which the venture of faith can reasonably be made; it can show that the neces-

sary faith does not differ essentially from the faith involved in science and in other human undertakings but is continuous with it. When the venture of faith has been made, reasoning can do a good deal to defend and justify the results, but it cannot eliminate the need for the venture. Nor would religion have it otherwise: it does not desire the reduction of its basis to a merely prudential acceptance of the demonstrable. Faith, as Dr. Inge has often said, begins in an experiment and ends in an experience.

Those who have living faith in God come to it by various paths: by learning it in early life and thereafter, as it grows and deepens, finding it not inadequate to the demands of life and of thought; or because they are strongly attracted and irresistibly influenced by living examples of its grace and power; or because they find by experience the barrenness of life without it; or because they come to a new realization of themselves and of God in worship, or by some pure and noble joy which makes all things new and themselves more sensitive to the things of the spirit; or because some sorrow which no human aid can do much to relieve either leads or drives them to seek beyond human aid; or it may be that they can never for long rid themselves of a sense of the transience of all earthly things, and are at the same time impelled to seek an abiding reality. These and other ways are those in which the Divine grace, which always prevents and follows us, attracts and wins the souls of men to living faith in God. Thus we come to



believe. But the reasons why *we come to believe* are not necessarily the reasons why *what we believe* is good or bad, true or false, adequate or inadequate. Those issues can only be decided when the content of our religious belief, however acquired, is brought into relation with other knowledge or well-grounded belief.

In this lecture we shall be concerned with some aspects of Theism and of what faith may reasonably affirm about God without, for the most part, any appeal to the content of specific revelations, if such there be. Religion's ultimate problems of thought are about the nature of God. If we could reasonably affirm *nothing* about God beyond the fact that He exists, the bare affirmation could have no influence on life, or indeed any meaning. What men are able or unable to believe about the nature of God ultimately determines whether or no they believe in Him at all; while if there is truth in the remark that 'such as men themselves are, such will God appear to them to be', it is not less true that men tend to become such as they really believe the nature of God to be. There are multitudes to-day for whom not a little of the past teaching of the Church about God seems to be ungrounded and even self-contradictory, either not required by any or else inconsistent with many facts of experience. They seem only certain that they disbelieve much of what official theological formularies and forms of worship seem to say and of what the Bible seems to imply. The character of God, His

relation to the world and to the individual, His power and His love—those vital matters are for multitudes only open questions; consequently, for them, there is no living faith in God, whether or no they deny His existence.

The traditional lines of approach to the questions about the being and nature of God seem rather remote from the modern outlook, while the authoritarians reply to or silence the questions without answering them. There is, indeed, a vast store of speculation, marked by great learning and ingenuity, often contemptuously dismissed by those who know least about it. But the trouble is that so much of it is reasoning aloof from facts about the actual world and human experience, *a priori* reasoning which seems to assume that thought itself is able to prescribe what it befits and behoves God to be and to do. Some of it has the appearance of an artificial creation designed to support dogmatic positions which historically were formulated on much less data than we now possess; and when related to experience and to facts it issues in insoluble puzzles, which are then obscured rather than resolved by further exercise of speculative ingenuity, until God and facts alike seem to be clouded in a haze of words.

The growth and great success of scientific method, and the adoption of the theory of Evolution, have involved an approach to the facts of life and of thought different from that which dominated the thought of the past, a method which is experimental

and empirical. It may well be that empirical methods cannot take us as far, with the same appearance of certainty, as more speculative systems of thought purported to do; but at least they have a more real basis than imagination for their more modest affirmations, whereas even when more speculative methods have evoked systems of thought internally consistent, it is a further and basic question, still unanswered, whether they have relevance to anything beyond thought itself, *i.e.* whether they are valid of what is actual. Empirical methods at least provide a reliable foundation for our inferences, and even for those further ventures of faith which may reasonably be made so long as they do not conflict with what is empirically established. In the modern world the question asked about religious as about other affirmations is not 'Why should they *not* be believed?' but rather 'On what grounds are they made?' It makes a great difference which of those questions is asked. If sometimes we must needs rest content with a certain measure of agnosticism, that need not inhibit reasonable ventures of faith; and so to rest content and so to venture is not only wiser but is also more in harmony with the spirit of Christ than is anything like pretence to knowledge which we do not possess.

We have indicated in previous lectures that there are good reasons for holding that human personality is not to be accounted for by ignoring the attributes and values it bears and brings to light, and that the

morality and religion which result from activities and insights of personality are not reasonably to be discredited by arguments based upon any less highly organized elements into which personality may be analysed.<sup>1</sup>

Now man, as we learn about him from anthropology, is from the first a religious creature. It is as ridiculous to appeal to the crudities of primitive religion as discrediting the forms it assumes among civilized and educated men as it would be to try to discredit modern science by pointing to the puerilities of primitive magic. Religion, notoriously difficult to define, is, as Dr. Clement Webb writes,

always a conscious relation or attempt to get into relation with what, however crudely imagined or conceived, is yet imagined or conceived as somehow containing in itself the mysterious power at the heart of things. It thus always involves at least an implicit view or theory of what, when reflection is sufficiently advanced, is seen . . . to be the Ultimate Reality.<sup>2</sup>

Religion is thus always concerned with what Dr. Oman calls 'the Supernatural',<sup>3</sup> that is, with what lies beyond what is seen or is otherwise directly apprehensible by the senses and interpreted as the natural world. Now though the Object of religion has been so varyingly conceived, and though religion has found

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 22 ff.

<sup>2</sup> C. C. J. Webb, *A Century of Anglican Theology*, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> The word has many unfortunate associations but, at least in the sense here adopted, it is indispensable.

expression in such variegated mythologies and theologies, the human needs and attitudes which it awakens and satisfies are characteristically uniform. Awe, veneration, worship, prayer, sacrifice, the sense of dependence, insignificance and guilt, an instinctive obedience, the need of purification and the sense of deliverance and joy—these characteristics are found in other living religions as well as in Christianity, and also in cults which now possess only historical interest. We may dismiss, if we will, these experiences of human nature as the result of an universal illusion. We may say they are the 'projection' of subjective cravings and wishes; and indeed that may be the psychological account of them. But it is a further question whether the projection is projected towards nothing, or towards some invisible Reality which calls it forth. That is a question which psychology, so long as it knows its own limits and minds its own business, will not attempt to answer: if it does so it is psychology no longer, but is using the disguise of science to masquerade as philosophy.

Moreover, an universal illusion arising spontaneously among very different races, descended from different stocks and having no contacts with each other throughout the whole relevant course of their history, is not an explanation so free from difficulties as to warrant its acceptance without very strong evidence in support of it. It is at least just as reasonable, or much more reasonable, to account for these common religious experiences and activities of man-

kind as resulting from the native response of human nature to a supreme Spirit acting upon the souls of men in every age and place. These experiences and activities arise naturally out of man's nature in response to his environment: they are not artificially grafted on to man's nature. If they are held to point to no Reality as their Object, then we may reply with Romanes that

they are out of analogy with all other instinctive endowments. Elsewhere in the animal kingdom we never meet with such a thing as an instinct pointing aimlessly; and therefore the fact of man being as it is said a religious animal, *i.e.*, presenting a class of feelings of a peculiar nature directed to particular ends, and most akin to, if not identical with, true instinct, is so far in my opinion a legitimate argument in favour of the reality of some object towards which the religious side of this animal's nature is directed.<sup>1</sup>

To which may be added the judgment expressed in the familiar words of the great philosopher Mr. F. H. Bradley:

the man who demands a reality more solid than that of the religious consciousness seeks he does not know what.<sup>2</sup>

But those who quote Mr. Bradley's words often interpret them in a sense he did not intend. It does not follow, as is often assumed, that because the religious consciousness is real, and because the reli-

<sup>1</sup> G. J. Romanes, quoted by W. R. Inge in *Freedom, Love and Truth*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, eighth impression, p. 449.

gious activities of man's nature point to some reality as their Object, religious experience thereby entitles us to bestow a character and attributes upon that Object without reference to other knowledge about the world and man, still less to ascribe to It a nature and attributes which may be inconsistent with such other knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Religious experience and moral experience disclose what are indeed real values for us, but so far as those values *alone* can inform us, the universe as a whole may be such as to destroy both us and our values. There may be other and more features of the universe which do not confirm the view of its nature, or the kind of explanation of it, which the moral and religious life of man undoubtedly indicates. Hence it is only by reference to a wider field of experience and knowledge than those of purely moral and religious phenomena and values that reasonable men can find adequate *grounds* (as distinct from *causes*) of confidence that moral and religious values are reliable intimations of an Ultimate Reality whose nature and attributes are manifested in them. The grounds of that confidence are bound up with other well-grounded beliefs about the world and the status of mind and personal life, of which ethical Theism is the most reasonable explanation. If

philosophy can show that theistic belief is reasonable in the sense that it is continuous with the faith of science

<sup>1</sup> No belief is to be wholly justified by saying that religion demands it. The records of superstition and mythology are full of beliefs which religion has demanded, but which nevertheless have been discarded.

and is on a par, in respect of its intellectual status, with the probabilities which are involved in all explanation and in all other knowledge concerning Actuality,<sup>1</sup>

then, and only then, do the deliverances of the moral and religious consciousness possess the widest and most secure grounds attainable, and may legitimately and immensely enrich the idea of God.

In human thought which aims at explanation, there is no escape from 'anthropic' categories which imply human interest and some judgments of value. But the recognition of intelligence and purposive design is less affected by emotional desires and aspirations than are our moral and religious judgments. If I see a vastly complex piece of modern machinery, I may be unable to say at all precisely what its purpose is, but this inability will not lead me to say that it exists for no purpose at all or expresses none. If I am then enlightened as to its purpose, I shall still be not a whit the less convinced that it shows purposive design even if I am forced to admit the purpose to be devilish and to outrage every emotional desire or ethical aspiration I may possess. Hence it seems to me that if the universe shows evidence of intelligent purposive design, such evidence is, in one and a real sense, the ultimate ground attainable on which Theism can reasonably be based, even though the theistic conclusion must needs fall short of logical compulsion by the evidence.

<sup>1</sup> F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. ii, p. 250.



It may be freely conceded that the old form of the teleological argument, or 'the argument from design', has lost its force in the light of the knowledge summarized in the word Evolution. That the eye is adapted for seeing and the ear for hearing can be accounted for without supposing that they were Divinely designed to see and hear. Nevertheless there is a much wider design argument, the force of which is increased by modern knowledge of evolution, an argument more aptly comparable to a piece of chain armour than to a chain whose strength is that of its weakest link. Such an argument is set out with consummate skill and massiveness in the chapter on Cosmic Teleology in Dr. F. R. Tennant's great work entitled *Philosophical Theology*.<sup>1</sup>

This argument does not at all depend upon the multitude of what seem to be particular instances of design. It points rather to the apparent agreement of numberless causes to produce, and by their united and interlacing action to maintain, an order of Nature instead of a senseless chaos. Our ordered world is but a fragment of the whole universe, but that is no sufficient reason for assuming a mindless and mechanical explanation of the whole, which knowledge of the

<sup>1</sup> Vol. ii, chapter iv. What follows is largely an outline summary of the more striking parts of Dr. Tennant's argument. His argument is so closely knit that I am aware of the great danger that a summary may utterly fail to reveal its strength; but the liberty taken and the risk involved may perhaps be justified if they lead any students to study this great work carefully. It should be mastered by every theological student, though I fear that many will not find it always easy reading.

ordered fragment we know best does not support. We must build on our knowledge, not on our ignorance. Nor is our ordered fragment independent and isolated: it exists as what it is 'by permission', so to say, of the rest.

Human science and knowledge are possible because there is likeness and correspondence between the marvellous complexity of human thought and that which exists outside us. Thought, of course, is suggested by outside things, so the wonder is not only or mainly in our thought: it lies in the fact that the world allows itself to be thought about. Nature will respond intelligibly to what we call the right experiment, but not to the wrong one; nor can man lay down the conditions on which Nature will disclose its secrets. Next, if science is right in teaching that what is called the inorganic, or non-living, realm was earlier in time than the organic, or living, then the processes which make life possible and sustain it would have been the same as they are had no life 'emerged' at all. Thus there would seem to have been a development in fitness for life. This development of inorganic Nature involved an interconnexion between numerous conditions which were not causes of each other, so that the inorganic realm itself resembles an organism, though (even if it be alive) it has neither intelligence nor foresight. The remarkableness of numerous coincidences and their impressiveness is, of course, an affair of psychology and not of logic; but so is our belief that other human beings are like ourselves.

Similarly the sense of beauty is awakened by what is outside us. We cannot see order and beauty everywhere, or just where we will. It is the result of affinity between our minds and what is outside us. That human faculties contribute so much in the appreciation of beauty suggests that Nature has a significance for man which it has not for itself. Nature's beauty has never been purposeless for man. The mysterious loveliness and awesome grandeur of the natural world have always affected and conditioned man's religious experience and suggested mysterious invisible presences. Thus Nature's beauty is in line with the fact that the world allows itself to be thought about, and with the belief that the world is a designed scene for human life.

Then man is a personal moral being; and, as is often said, he belongs to Nature: he is 'of a piece with' or is 'organic to' Nature, 'the child of Nature'. In so far as this is true, no explanation of Nature can be adequate which ignores her motherhood of man. It follows, too, that moral values are characteristic of that part of Nature which is personal. Thus, though moral values *alone* cannot conduct to belief in an universe or a God who will preserve them, man and his moral life are part of the data without which the world cannot reasonably be interpreted. If Nature shows design, its highest product may indicate something of what the designed end is. Nor can man achieve anything except by using the means with which Nature has provided him. He does not stand

outside a Nature which is hostile to his morality, even though moral goodness is only to be achieved through conflict. The attainment of moral and spiritual status accords with the other stages in the long ascent of man. Advance and attainment have always depended upon environment as well as upon the nature of living creatures.

Men feel in varying degrees the imperatives of conscience; but it is a not irrelevant fact that for the most part they must be able to believe that the distinction between right and wrong corresponds to something at the heart of things, or reflects the nature of some reality beyond themselves, if the imperatives of conscience are to maintain full urgency. We cannot regard ethics as being no more than what we and others think about conduct. It has been in and through the sincere belief that the moral life of man reflects a reality beyond it that the constraint of the moral law has been most strongly felt and accepted. Without that belief, ethical systems have not inspired anything like the same intensity of devotion. That the universe is the work and an expression of purposive Intelligence is the belief about it within which the demands of morality upon the human mind have attained a maximum intensity and extent.

Thus the wider teleology which holds that there are adequate indications that the world bespeaks intelligent purposive design, and would infer Mind or God behind it as its Ground, does not build upon gaps in scientific knowledge which no doubt exist but may

close up. The point is that what we call the various fields of natural science are, as it were, 'knit together' into a stable order of Nature. This is the most obvious as well as the most marvellous thing about them. The data of the sciences, and the 'laws of nature', are not actually disparate because we can separate them for purposes of study and experiment. There is no *a priori*, or *necessary*, reason why such a vast assemblage should form an ordered world; and if, as is wildly improbable, certain beings came to possess consciousness and intelligence by chance, there is no *necessary* reason why the world confronting them should not have been completely unintelligible to them.<sup>1</sup>

These facts, of course, do not logically prove the existence of a purposive directing Mind as Nature's Ground: nothing can ever accomplish that. But the distinct data which the several sciences investigate are parts of a whole, interconnected, interdependent, and wondrously continuous. It is when we seek a sufficient ground or explanation of this ordered whole that belief in an ultimate Mind, or God, becomes a reasonable belief.

This reasonable belief is further strengthened when we look back upon the long, uphill road which Nature travelled before it brought forth man. The further we go back the more certain it becomes that any existing design was entirely independent of primitive organisms. They had no conscious outlook upon a future. It

<sup>1</sup> Except, of course, that it is hard to imagine how, in such circumstances, they could ever have gained intelligence at all.

is the importance of the part played by environment which so strongly suggests external design. The word 'selection' is but a misleading figure of speech when used of unself-conscious organisms or a non-intelligent Nature. Even if something in the organisms determined the variations or mutations which should arise, which of these should survive and which perish was determined by the environment. To speak of 'unconscious purpose' is to use words without meaning. If the phrase be given meaning, the most it can signify is that there is a tendency or an 'urge' in Nature as a whole making for what men regard as advance from lower to higher. Throughout Evolution, as we have noted earlier,<sup>1</sup> there has been a constancy of direction the more impressive on account of the fearful decay and retrogression which have accompanied it.

If we would explain, in the last resort the choice is between Divine purpose and design on the one hand and ungrounded chance or coincidence on the other. Advanced human planning often fails, and would fail more often did not reflecting intelligence suggest improvements. Yet, if purposive intelligence or Divine design be rejected as unnecessary to account for the evolutionary process, we must adopt a theory which attributes to unconscious Nature an 'urge' which, through an immensely long development, has gone in the right direction on all the important occasions. If so, to quote Dr. Tennant:

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 50 f.

Nature's 'unconscious wisdom' must vastly exceed the sapience and foresight of humanity. . . . In fact, the theory requires us to believe that Nature keeps her head, which *ex hypothesi* is brainless, through all the changes and chances of cosmic history.<sup>1</sup>

Of all mysteries, the final one, common alike to all theories, is that anything should exist and not just nothing. In the last resort, the alternative explanations are, as Lord Kelvin said long ago, either belief in Creative Power or acceptance of a theory of a fortuitous concourse of atoms. We may recognize the final mystery—and some final mystery there must needs be—as God, or we may imagine it as elements of mindless stuff from which everything that is has somehow evolved. In experience there is nothing whatever analogous to this second idea, nothing even faintly like it; and it cannot possibly *explain* why mindless stuff should have arranged itself into a universe interconnected, continuous, interdependent, which can be partly and progressively understood by human minds. Belief in an intelligent Mind and Will at least reduces the mystery because it suggests a possible and sufficient reason. If the idea of directing purpose, suggesting God, be rejected, the alternative may be thus stated, again in Dr. Tennant's words. It is

to regard the self-subsistent entities, of which the world is constituted, as comparable with letters of type which have shuffled themselves not only into a book or a literature

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

but also into a reader commanding the particular tongue in which the book utters its unintentional meaning.<sup>1</sup>

If a man's mind can rest in that 'explanation' there is perhaps no more to be said; except that it is hard to see why he should accuse the most naïvely religious person of being credulous, or why any religious person should regard such an accuser as lacking in faith.

It is often said that the purposive Intelligence or Mind required as an explanation of the design which the world discloses is not the God of religious faith. That is true so long as we consider design only: it is much less true when we take account of *what* has been designed and has evolved from it. God is the world-Ground upon Whom the world depends for its existence and for being the kind of world it is. The way is open for moral and religious faith to attribute to God the character which moral and religious experience within the world require, so long as nothing is attributed which conflicts with knowledge. The nature of the Agency operative in the *course* of events in the evolutionary order suggests the nature of the Agency at the *beginning* of events, for the process has been continuous. To set man and his values over against the material creation as a kind of by-product of no essential significance is only possible on the assumption, alike baseless and perverse, that the lower is more real than the higher. Man and his ideals exist and are

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 111.



demonstrably as real as anything else: man's ideals are only realizable by using the means with which the universe provides him. We are thus justified in thinking of the Divine power behind the universe in the light of the highest it has produced, that is, in terms of personality. If God's nature is revealed in creation at all, it will be in human nature at its highest and best that we shall see the Divine nature revealed in the highest form we can understand. Thus it may well be that we cannot attain the fullest knowledge of God which is possible to man until we see Him incarnating His spirit in man.

God as the world-Ground is the world's Creator. Because the universe as a whole cannot have any other environment to evoke emergence from it, it follows that the evolved features of the cosmic process were implicit in the ultimate act of creation.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Tennant has an interesting argument to show that God could not be the world-architect, in the sense that He fashioned pre-existing and self-subsisting material, unless He be also the Creator. For if there were pre-existing and self-subsisting stuff it must have had some nature; that nature, being what it was, did not

<sup>1</sup> This, of course, does not mean that they were actually already existent in germ; see above, p. 16. Nor does it mean that the development of increasing order and purposiveness in Evolution are adequately explained by the original nature and interactions of the original world-elements. The coming together of so many causes to produce and maintain an ordered developing universe with its emerging products suggests the continual directing activity of God, in other words, Divine Immanence.

evolve a Cosmos until God worked upon it. But this prior nature which it had—this set of relations and interactions—by reason of which it remained orderless and chaotic, could not be stripped off, and another set, giving it a nature capable of evolving a cosmos, be imposed upon the pre-existing material, without annihilating it. The analogy of human manufacturing does not apply because we only alter or modify *some* of the nature of the material on which we work, which is but a tiny fraction of the universe: nor do our manufactures evolve. Thus God as world-Ground implies God as Creator.

There cannot, of course, be any analogy in human experience to the notion of creation. The ultimate cannot be explained in terms of anything else, or it would not be ultimate; and some ultimates there must be. Further back than a living, purposive Intelligence or Spirit there is no need to go. Nor is there any clearer or simpler notion than that of creation to describe the world's dependence upon God. As the only God we can know is the world-Ground, we should think of creation as the activity essential to the nature and will of God, and therefore as co-eternal with Him. God is a living determinate Spirit, creation being what it is because of what He is. He is the alpha and omega of all existence, so that a different world would imply a different God. The idea of creation insists that, none the less, God and the world are not to be identified, and that, if God be immanent in His creation, He is not exhausted in it.

The world depends, every moment of its existence, upon the world-Ground, upon His nature and His will. In this sense God transcends the world.

It need not be emphasized that if the evolutionary process witnesses to a spiritual Agency behind and within it, which religion calls God, then the God revealed is a God Whose nature, attributes and powers immeasurably surpass our imagination. Human analogies can be nothing more than inadequate symbols. God, so revealed, is of transcendent power and majesty, including a majesty of beauty. To that, whatever else and for other reasons we believe about God, we must hold fast. To us, more than to the Psalmist, the heavens declare His glory, the firmament His handiwork. But inasmuch as our thought is necessarily conditioned by time and space, whereas in the same sense God Himself cannot be, it follows that God as He is in Himself must for ever transcend human thought and cannot be comprehended within it. Religion, however, suffers no injury when it is said that God as He is in His own being is unknowable; for that does not mean that He is unknown in His relations with the world and ourselves. Religion suffers more injury if it is pretended that God is better known than He really is.

It is, further, more than doubtful whether religion is assisted, or knowledge about God increased, by describing Him as 'infinite', or by ascribing to Him an assemblage of human attributes extended to

infinity. Indeed there is no meaning in ascribing to God infinitely extended attributes which, so extended, are inconsistent with one another: that is to make God not a determinate Spirit but a mere word in which all differences disappear. Thus when Dr. Temple says "we can only understand the world if it be the creation of a God Who is unlimited alike in Goodness and in Power", the statement is not illuminating unless the unlimited power is the unlimited power of goodness<sup>1</sup>: it cannot include any power which is not compatible with goodness. We can conceive means which unqualified omnipotence could employ to achieve its ends which we cannot conceive goodness and love could use. Because the Divine attributes must be compatible with each other if God is a Living Spirit, it follows that there is a sense in which God is non-infinite, even if we cannot apply to Him the connotation of the word 'finite'.<sup>2</sup> The word infinite has significance in regard to things which have magnitude and are divisible, but in this sense the word cannot be applied to God. He may be said to be infinite in the sense that He is not limited by any other self-subsistent things. That is implied in His being the Creator.

<sup>1</sup> Of course I do not suggest that Dr. Temple supposes it is otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> The time-honoured use of negatives in the attempt to characterize the Divine nature is of little value. Every negative must imply some positive of which it is the negative, and if the positive cannot be understood or transcends human conception, the use of the negative tells us nothing.

Similarly if the word 'perfection' is to be used of God with significance it must denote some *kind* of perfection. God, as the sustainer and guide of an evolving universe, cannot be perfect in the sense that His action is changeless. Nor in fact is personal wisdom, which must be included in any ascription of perfection to God, shown in unvarying uniformity of behaviour whether the circumstances be the same or not: that, as Dr. Temple remarks, should rather be called mulish.<sup>1</sup> Personal wisdom consists in constancy of purpose expressed through infinitely various response to different conditions. God's perfection is before all else an ethical perfection: it involves willing and doing, and therefore cannot be literally immutable or changeless. It can be immutable and perfect in the sense that it involves no variableness in its transcendent excellence. God is perfect in the sense that He is "that than which no *better* can be conceived". The all-embracing thought of God as love includes the belief that He is perfect righteousness, claiming righteousness in us in our relations with Him and with one another. The Bible shows with what difficulty this attribute was ascribed to God, but insistence upon its primacy is characteristic of all that is best in the Bible and in religion generally. The categorical imperativeness of our moral conscience is the most convincing revelation of the character of God which we carry within us. So far as our moral judgments are right they are, we may say, the very

<sup>1</sup> W. Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, p. 267.

thoughts of God. We do not mean, of course, that God is bound by the detailed moral rules of human life, but we do mean that the ultimate principles of moral judgment apply to Him as to us, and express His nature.

Belief in God as the perfection of righteousness and love at once raises the most formidable of all difficulties for such Theism, namely, that presented by the evil, suffering and pain of the world. Our moral consciousness assures us that pain and suffering are often a great, and sin always a greater, evil, nor by any ingenuity can they be thought to be anything else. If we cannot trust this judgment neither can we trust our recognition of good. For Christians the difficulty is increased by the fact that in the Biblical record men see God acting visibly in human affairs, whereas experience causes them to doubt whether in fact He did so, and if He did, why He apparently does so no longer. This subject is so vast and profound that in this lecture I can do no more than indicate briefly the lines on which the difficulties can be met.

In the first place we can say frankly that the Biblical stories of cataclysmic interventions are in many instances dramatic interpretations made by the religious consciousness of natural and fortunate events. In some cases, no doubt, they are not records of history at all, but myth. Anyway, there is no doubt that expectation of such dramatic Divine interventions is so extremely improbable as to be vain, and is

consequently always to be discouraged; though it is equally true that men often complain that God does nothing when the truth is that they know nothing of what He does, and are not much concerned to fit themselves to know. Further, whatever criticisms can be made of the Bible in this connexion, it is certain that neither it nor Christianity has ever minimized either the fact or the seriousness of moral evil and of suffering. The affirmation that God is perfectly righteous and loving has been made in the teeth of these overshadowing facts, not in ignorance of them. It has also been made while admitting that there is no completely satisfying theoretical answer to the problem of evil and suffering. What has been and is claimed by the Christian religion is not the possession of a wholly satisfying answer to the theoretical problem, but the power to gain victory over the facts which give rise to it; and that is far better.

Theism, apart from the enrichment it receives from Christianity, would affirm that though God is ultimately responsible for the fact that evil exists, He is not directly responsible for the fact that men choose evil. They do so because the exercise of their freedom is determined by what they regard as their apparent good which is so often not their real good.<sup>1</sup> The facts of the evolutionary world make it 'practically inevitable' that men will so wrongly choose, and for that God must be responsible. It is easy to say that God might have created a different world in which it

<sup>1</sup> *Nature, Man and God*, pp. 362 ff.

would not have been 'practically inevitable' that men would choose evil, but it is impossibly difficult to imagine how such a different world, without the possibility of moral evil and of physical suffering, could also make possible the realization of what men recognize as the highest good. For the very nature of moral goodness is that it cannot be created ready-made: it can only be *won*. If it be true that one of the Divine purposes is the shaping of human souls through conflict with and the conquest of uncertainty, difficulty, pain and evil, souls who shall thus have learnt freely to choose their real good and refuse the evil, then the world must be a changing and developing world with the possibility and the 'practical inevitability' of moral evil and physical suffering. The universe, in fact, is not ill-adapted to that purpose. This means that pain and evil are means to a greater good than could conceivably be attained otherwise than through victory over them. It does not mean that on this account they cease to be bad: what it does mean is that that they as well as good should exist will ultimately be seen to have been good. If God is love and seeks the free response of love in souls who have come to learn that such response is their own highest good, then that end cannot be achieved by mere power, nor by sweeping away all the evil and the suffering which result from man's failure so to respond.

Further, if there were no pain or want there would be no effort: if no effort, then no progress; if no



progress, then no attainment, no anything morally good, but only non-moral, stagnant correctness. A world without the possibility of evil and suffering, which ministered to our ease and pleasure at every turn, could not have been the scene of the emergence of moral and spiritual life and of its development. If the creating and perfecting of such life be one of God's purposes, an imperfect world is actually necessary.

The apparently useless physical suffering and pain which abound in human life and throughout the animal creation is the most difficult element in the problem of evil in the world of a God affirmed to be wholly good and holy love. The utmost that natural theology can do at this point is to show that such pain is either a necessary and inevitable by-product of an order of Nature such as alone can produce the highest good, or an essential element in organic evolution, or both.<sup>1</sup> If this can be done, the way is prepared for the fuller unveiling of the meaning of suffering and pain afforded by the Cross, interpreted as Christianity interprets it. It has often been observed, though the point cannot be argued here, both that animal life is on the whole happy and therefore as a whole good, and that though the suffering of animals is an evil, it is yet good for something, an essential element in organic evolution.

Of human suffering it can be said once more that a physical order of Nature characterized by a high

<sup>1</sup> Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. ii, p. 198.

degree of regularity is essential if the world is to be a moral order able to produce free goodness and nobility of life. Upon the regularity of Nature depends our discovery of probability to guide us, the gaining of ability to predict and therewith to plan, to acquire prudence, to accumulate ordered past experience, to assimilate its significance and so to gain reliable knowledge, to form habits and to seek future ends. It is the settled order of Nature which has made possible the development of these faculties and activities, upon which the possibility of intelligent and moral life depend. This is often entirely ignored when men think about human suffering. If this regularity of Nature were changed for a state of affairs in which God continually intervened on the scale necessary to save us from all the painful consequences indubitably entailed, man could neither have acquired reason nor now employ it in the conduct of life, and there could therefore be no moral goodness. How an evolutionary world of unmingled pleasure, ease, safety and comfort could produce intelligence and moral and spiritual life, is a problem which the theist can rightly leave to the unbeliever, who seems in no haste to grapple with it. Further, the material elements of Nature which are so beneficial to us alike in themselves and in the uses we can make of them, could not have all their 'good' qualities while lacking those, often the same, qualities which may harm us: the very properties which constitute the 'good' inevitably involve the possibilities of harm. Things must *be*

*something*, that is, have determinate natures. Indeed, the riddance of the world of physical suffering would require such a degree of continual intervention in the regular order of Nature as would transform it into a meaningless chaos.

The character and settled order of Nature undoubtedly involve, for individuals, pain which exceeds any good results to be achieved by them by means of it. But there is no need to think of this as directly and deliberately appointed to them by God, or for any specific purpose.<sup>1</sup> The human afflictions which fall under this head need not be regarded as directly 'sent' by God: they may be regarded as the inevitable and incidental by-products of an order of Nature which, *as a whole*, is required for the realization of the highest good which is not otherwise to be had. It is the regularity, not the particular sufferings it may entail, which God directly wills. Moreover, although excessive suffering may and often does degrade human life, yet at the higher human levels we see that it need not and often does not do so. If deserved suffering is bravely borne we rightly feel that it contributes largely to the redemption of the

<sup>1</sup> The Divine Immanence, or the directing activity of God whereby the world is maintained as a cosmos which does not disrupt, and which may be varied so as to secure that God's unchanging purposes are not frustrated, need not mean that all particular events have no other efficient cause than direct Divine activity. Such a conception of Divine immanence renders the problem of evil incapable even of mitigation and is fatal to ethical Theism. If every event is directly caused by God, His nature cannot be benevolent or wholly good.

wrongdoer; but undeserved suffering, similarly borne,—that is, when all that is consistent with righteousness has been done to avoid or remove it, if it be borne with a steady refusal to be embittered,—ennobles the sufferer himself and all who come in contact with him. It is not for nothing that the Epistle to the Hebrews says of Jesus that he was ‘made perfect through suffering’. In this respect, as in so many others, man need not, by the grace of God, be at the mercy of his environment, but may bring good out of evil.

Nor should this dark problem be left entirely to the sphere of thought. One who, above all others, taught men to think of God as a loving Father, himself encountered in a terrible form most of the experiences which lead men to deny the goodness and the love of God. The Christian religion does not claim that God’s nature can be understood and justified merely by thinking about it; and it is for the most part when we merely look on the evil and pain of the world that we think of God as doing likewise. If Christ reveals to us the nature of God, this means that the Divine nature shares in the world’s sorrow and through it works the world’s redemption. Nor have we any right to dismiss Jesus’ reading of the Divine nature as false unless we are sure that we have looked upon life through his eyes and lived it in his Spirit.

The doctrine of eternal life, extending beyond death, is, of course, not without its bearing on this problem. Assuredly we may not argue that because

justice to individuals is not done in this life, there must therefore be another life in which it is done. But if we have *other grounds* for an immortal hope, this present world need not be regarded as the whole scene of human life, and its unavoidable ills, however terrible they may now be, may still be insignificant compared with the glory that shall be revealed.

Such a line of reasoning as the foregoing may be thought to imply some restriction of popular notions of Divine omnipotence. But popular notions of that Divine attribute are often such as to make it utterly incompatible with other Divine attributes of more religious and more moral importance, and more evocative of worship.<sup>1</sup> We have already noted that omnipotence of love is not the same thing as sheer omnipotence not so qualified. Nor is there any meaning in saying that God is omnipotent in the sense that He *could* have willed and created a regular order of Nature to produce moral and spiritual life and at the same time have avoided the consequences of the world being of that character. We imply no significant limitation of God if we say that He is unable to evolve highly organized moral and spiritual beings without

<sup>1</sup> It is worth observing that to ascribe attributes to God which are inconsistent with one another is to all intents and purposes to assert polytheism. God, as a perfect Society of Divine Persons, would be a real Unity, whereas a single Being conceived as characterized by attributes which are really incompatible is only an Unity in a verbal sense. The essence of polytheism is that the Divine has differing natures and characteristics.

allowing a struggle for existence, or to train such human souls for fellowship with Himself without allowing the existence of sin and pain. It is not implied that there is some other power external to God or independent of Him by which He is conditioned and limited. That is ruled out when it is said that God is Creator. All human ideas of what is possible and impossible are extracted by us from the actual world of which God is the Ground and Creator, and the possibilities and impossibilities are what they are because God is what He is. They express His nature, but do not in any other sense bind Him or exist independently of Him. No one supposes that God can make the past not to have happened as it did. He may indeed, and does, over-rule the past so as to make its consequences in the present and future other than, but for His over-ruling, they would be. The only intelligible meaning of omnipotence<sup>1</sup> compatible with other Divine attributes is that God is the source of all the power there is. His rule of love is the only ultimate power.

These considerations must needs control the thought of Divine Providence. It is often said that if God's rule is ultimately the only power there is, it is the final determining factor, and that therefore against it man is in the last resort impotent. But this overlooks the fact that the relation of God to the personal

<sup>1</sup> The terms "All-Sovereign" or "All-ruling" are preferable to the word Omnipotence, which is so involved in popular misconceptions that it can hardly be redeemed from them.

beings bearing His own image is and must be a *personal relation*. It can only be effected by the constraining power of love which, by its nature, must confer and can never abolish freedom. God does not treat persons as though they were things. Religion and theology need not conceive Divine Providence inconsistently with the personality which that same Providence has bestowed upon His children. Though God's rule is indeed the only final constraining power, it does not and it cannot, if it be a rule of love, actualize itself among men except as they freely recognize and accept it. It is not as an answer to a merely logical problem that it is affirmed that God shall be all in all: it is an affirmation of faith. To admit, in abstract theory, that God's rule may never be fully actualized, does not inhibit the faith that it will be, and without such faith it cannot be actualized if it is to remain a rule of love.<sup>1</sup>

God, as the upholder and sustainer of creation, must be conceived as immanent in it while also, as Creator, He transcends it. He is thus

uniquely related to every part of the world and to the world as a whole (and) must be, so to speak, ubiquitous or omnipresent; and, in virtue of an unrestricted range of attention, He must be said to be omniscient as to all that is and has been, and also as to all that will be, in so far as it is the outcome of uniform causation.<sup>2</sup>

The last words suggest a limitation of the Divine

<sup>1</sup> See Tennant, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-197.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

foreknowledge. The creation of personal beings is in one sense a Divine self-limitation, yet in another sense it is not, because it is the expression of His own will and nature. The degree of personal freedom accorded to personal beings whereby they possess a degree of creative activity allowed by God, involves a corresponding limitation of Divine foreknowledge. But as it is God's purpose to allow the freedom by which men are self-determined by their power to choose their apparent good, God cannot be surprised, nor is His purpose thereby liable to ultimate frustration. God, being personal, can vary His activity upon or within the world in order to realize His unvarying purposes. But there is no religious or theological need for the idea of Divine foreknowledge as consisting in foreknowing the infinite number of events in the temporal order which occur because of the freedom bestowed upon human persons. That conception of Divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom, and it is only verbal juggling which can obscure the fact. The Divine knowledge must needs be different from our own; but whatever its nature and extent, as it is not accessible to us who must needs act in ignorance of it, it can in no way limit our choices.

The Divine omnipresence or immanence does not mean that God is equally present everywhere and *in* all things; there is no need thus to interpret God's unique relation to the world as a whole and to all its parts. To avoid the otherwise almost inevitable introduction of spatial conceptions into our idea of



God, instead of saying that God is everywhere it is better to say, with S. T. Coleridge, that wherever we are, we are in the presence of God. On the other hand, God's relation to the world as the living Spirit sustaining it involves His being not merely a detached contemplator of it. And if the Divine nature enters into and shares the world's sorrows, as Christianity affirms, God cannot be strictly impassible. Sincere sympathy with suffering is, as the very word 'sympathy' suggests, itself real suffering; though as God is free from creaturely limitations and imperfections, there is no need to attribute to Him all the disturbing and emotional content of human suffering and of human contemplation of it.

God as the world-Ground, its Creator and Designer, must be, as we have seen, a personal Spirit. He must be at least personal as we know personality. This attribution to Him of our highest category is suggested by knowledge, for it is in possessing intelligence and ethical purposiveness that the idea of God is satisfactory as an explanation of the world which has brought forth human personality. It is also certain that the religious consciousness cannot conceive the relation of God to the soul as less than a personal relationship. If we find in experience a power not ourselves which makes for righteousness, we may allow Dr. Rashdall to remind us that *things* do not make for righteousness. We may reasonably ascribe personality to a living Spirit immanent in and yet

transcending creation because our own personality permeates all our thoughts and actions, and yet transcends them, as it also transcends the elements of the material, physiological and psychological realms into which it can be analysed.<sup>1</sup> We may well speak of God as super-personal, provided such a term does not imply, as its use often does, something less than personality as we know it. Traditional Christian theology, as Dr. Webb reminds us, has thought less of the personality *of* God than of personality *in* God. We speak of God as personal not because we choose between that category and something higher, but because our only choice is between that category and something lower. Personality is the least inadequate conception we can ascribe to God. The fact that religion as well as thought requires a God with Whom man can have personal relations, does not mean that the nature of Divine personality is exhausted in that relationship. Even if all the potentialities of human personality were indefinitely perfected, personality in God might still be immeasurably more than all these. The conception of God does not become impersonal because we cannot ascribe to Him the characteristic limitations of human personality.

The thought of personality in God suggests at once the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity in Unity.

<sup>1</sup> Personality transcends our thought about it, yet is immanent in our thought. Transcendence and Immanence are not contradictory ideas, though the human mind can, of course, only think of them successively. God, far more so than human personality, cannot be fully comprehended in thought.

A speculation about the nature of God as He is in His own Being transcends attainable human knowledge; and it is at least doubtful whether this particular speculation is a *necessary* representation of God as disclosed in religious experience. On the other hand, there is no doubt that experience, and not merely abstract speculation, led to its formulation, beginning with the first Christians' experience of the historic Jesus, followed by that of his Spirit which remained an active factor in their experience when his visible presence was withdrawn; and, of course, they were throughout monotheists by religious tradition. To the unphilosophical and untheological mind the doctrine of the Trinity is wont to be interpreted as sheer Tritheism, while theologians admit that it is, as all such statements about the Being of God in Himself must be, an inadequate symbol. There is no escape from Tritheism if, in the statement "three Persons in one God" the word 'person' is given its modern meaning—an individual, self-conscious mind. Yet orthodoxy has always insisted that God is one Mind, not three. The long attempt to conceive, as the meaning of the word 'person' used in this doctrine, some entity which is neither a substantive person nor a mere attribute of personality, has never succeeded and is, at any rate empirically, impossible of achievement. The doctrine may reflect the fact that God is known to us in three ways: through Nature, in Christ and by the inner testimony of our own conscience and spirit. It can mean that there are within the Being of

God distinguishable activities corresponding to the ways in which He is made known to us. The doctrine enables Christians to say that Christ shares in the Reality which God is. It may help us to understand the thought of God as immanent in the world, in history and in our own hearts, while being, as Creator, also transcendent of the world. But it should now be frankly admitted that the acceptance of this doctrine, unless interpreted tritheistically, does not make it more possible than it is otherwise to comprehend the nature of the Being of God in formal thought.

The religious consciousness need find nothing disturbing to its conviction that it is aware of and can commune with God in the fact that the full reality of God must for ever be beyond human thought. Man's own life and personality are much more than his thought about them. And inasmuch as man can act and perceive beauty as well as think, these activities, which cannot be resolved into thought, may equally with it be ways of approach to God. And as religion is, like morality, concerned not only with thoughts but primarily with values, God as the Object of religion may be more adequately represented as the living Spirit Who is the perfection of Righteousness and Love, Wisdom, Truth and Beauty, and as their Source, than by any list of more abstract attributes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These must have a place in formal theology, but their use in more popular religious teaching raises questions rather than answers them. They require too much careful explanation, and this gives an impression that theology is largely a science of explaining that terms do not really mean what they seem plainly to say.

It is in these ideals that we least unworthily conceive of God. The more metaphysical attributes are either included in these ideals, or else are wont to be conceived in ways inconsistent with them.

Jesus always called God 'Father'. This title is found in the Old Testament, but only very occasionally and as one among others. Jesus seems to have used no other, and this constitutes a radical change of emphasis such as in religion may be more important than the introduction of novelty. There is nothing easy-going or merely sentimental in Jesus' thought of God and of His relations with mankind: the Divine Fatherhood is always a *Kingly* Fatherhood. This thought of God dominated his life, outlook and teaching. For him God was not, as on Sinai, a terror to evil-doers, but the Inspirer to positive good. His moral teaching awakens the inward 'Thou shalt' to replace the written 'Thou shalt not'. Consequent upon his conception of God as Personal Love, he taught that the kingship or rule of God must be accepted by and established within human hearts. It is in the realization of sonship to God and all that is implied in that relationship that human salvation consists. It is precisely this simple yet profound doctrine that men need to assimilate. Higher than it we cannot rise, and we are far indeed from having realized all its significance. It appears paradoxical and so remains on the surface of our minds, while we often attempt to hold it side by side with other thoughts of God which in their obvious meaning are often inconsistent with it.

For centuries its meaning was obscured by dreadful forms of a doctrine of everlasting punishment, which inevitably tended to represent the Christian gospel as primarily a means of escaping it, and also by metaphors drawn from politico-militarist civilization. These have led to popular notions of God which are anachronistic in the modern world. Our own danger is that of giving a scientific or even an economic twist to thought about God.

Again, as F. D. Maurice taught, the conception of the Fatherhood of God should supersede the older thought of His relationship to man expressed in the metaphors of covenant and contract; while a representation of God as requiring above all things and as the first service of men, continual propitiation by sacrifice, is utterly irreconcilable with the nature of God such as the parable of the prodigal son and many other sayings of Jesus depict. The human religious instincts which prompt to offer propitiation are included and transcended in the overwhelming desire for complete self-dedication and self-sacrifice which follows when a man is awakened to the true nature of sin in the light of the love of God. He will realize that he cannot offer any worthy sacrifice of his own, but he can be identified with the perfect sacrifice of the life and death of Christ. But this is something quite different from the thought of God's need of propitiatory sacrifice to enable Him to forgive sin. If we hold that in Jesus and in his teaching there is a revelation of the nature of God, we should pay atten-

tion not only to what he was like and what he taught, but also to what he did not teach and himself was not. If there is anything distinctive in Christianity it is the revelation of God in Christ, and the Christian must let this permeate his mind, fathom its implications and make his theology express them, and exclude other thoughts about God which distort and obscure the distinctive Christian revelation and render it ineffective—thoughts which no doubt appeal strongly to our more primitive instincts, such as the type of fear which it is the effect of perfect love to cast out.<sup>1</sup>

The way to living and supremely saving practical knowledge of God, which may and often does exist with little formal knowledge about Him, will never be an easy way, nor will superficial teaching point it out to men. But the issue of the discipline and the struggle involved can be expressed in some words of Dr. Inge, in a question to which experience returns no uncertain answer: Do we know of any who have sought the knowledge of God as diligently as other men seek wealth and honour, who have come away empty-handed?

<sup>1</sup> 1 John iv. 18. This, of course, does not exclude 'reverence and godly fear'. The realization of the consequences of sin in the present and in the past, and that temporal acts have eternal issues, ought to inspire man with a type of fear which is wholly sane and sanely religious.

## CHAPTER IV

### JESUS CHRIST: HIS SIGNIFICANCE AND AUTHORITY

**I**N PREVIOUS lectures I have argued in outline that the world-process and what has occurred in its course require the affirmation of ethical Theism as their most reasonable and sufficient explanation. The affirmation admittedly involves an act of faith; but there is nothing possessing the status of knowledge which can deny, either to that act of faith or to the beliefs about the nature of God in which it issues, the title of reasonable faith. The world-process is what it is by the will and the nature of God and is therefore a disclosure or revelation of His will and nature. The immanent activity within the creative order is not to be conceived as a mechanical force, because it is always the activity of a transcendent Personality, and may therefore be varied and assume new forms as circumstances develop or change.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as Dr. Temple observes, the Divine immanent activity may for centuries be manifested in ways which but par-

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 92, and also W. Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, pp. 266 ff., 286-300, for argument on this point.



tially disclose the Divine nature, yet when circumstances are appropriate or so require, may act so as to reveal that nature as it has always been.<sup>1</sup> If and when this occurs, it does not mean that some normally quiescent power of God is brought into action or is bestirring itself to occasional interventions, as the alleged occurrence of miracles has commonly been thought to imply: it results from that same immanent activity of the personal God which sustains creation as an ordered cosmos, or as what Dr. Tennant calls 'the relatively settled order of Nature', which is all that we are empirically entitled to understand by the phrase 'the uniformity of Nature'. The immanent activity of God, so understood, does not introduce into Nature elements of caprice or of chaos. Higher events or beings within the evolutionary process will act in accordance with their determinate natures, or the laws of their own being. These will not put science to confusion, so long as it is not sought to explain them in terms of lower categories than those which they themselves reveal. Science, however, can only be wise about such events after they have occurred, not before. Human actions, resulting from the freely determined characters of human persons, may and do produce effects within Nature which otherwise, so far as we know, Nature does not produce. Science cannot, except within limits, predict these actions, though it may be able to understand and give an account of them when they have taken place. It is not otherwise

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 296.

with the immanent activity of God, which is always personal activity, and does not cease to be personal because it may act uniformly.<sup>1</sup>

If the created world is a revelation of the nature of God, it does not follow that all aspects of it or all events within it equally reveal the Divine nature: some events may well reveal Him more clearly than do others. But it is only because existence as a whole constitutes a revelation of God that any particular events can be special revelations. There is no clear-cut division between the revelation which the creative process constitutes and the revelation afforded by special occasions or events within that process. Nor are Divine revealing and human discovering to be separated. The Divine activity cannot become *revelation* until its significance is apprehended by man. God may utter a Divine word or manifest His nature in a signal event, but this constitutes revelation only when it is understood and appreciated for what it is. Human activities are therefore always implied in asserting that there has been revelation. Moreover, the true significance of the revelatory event may be distorted or very imperfectly apprehended because of

<sup>1</sup> I am not concerned to assert (neither is it required), that there is any external intervention of some power of God as distinct from His immanent activity. But if external intervention does or did occur, inasmuch as science, in observing large-scale phenomena does not observe the behaviour of their individual atoms, nor yet observe microscopic behaviour in a world-wide field, it need be aware of nothing unusual or 'contrary to law' in such intervention, however great its results.

the limitations of man due to sin and ignorance. The Divine guidance of the creative process will include the Divine guidance of human minds within it, though not, of course, without their free and willing co-operation. We may say, with Dr. Temple, that the interaction of the process and of the minds which are alike guided by God is the essence of revelation.<sup>1</sup> Because the relationship of a personal God to human persons cannot be *any* kind of relation, but is always and only a personal one, the Divine illumination of human minds cannot be effected by a miraculous overriding of human limitations, or in any way other than by enabling men to get their own insights.<sup>2</sup> Thus there can be no 'revealed truths': there can be 'truths of revelation', that is, true readings of the significance of revelatory events. If modern Christians hold the Bible to embody the classic instance of revelation, or the word of God, they do so because they believe that book to contain the record of a revelation, not the book to be itself the revelation. It is because the revelation was in the events that it is contained in the record of them. For example, the Old Testament records the prophets' sincere dealing, in the light of their knowledge of God, with the events

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> This rules out the concept of revelation which has predominated in the Christian tradition, and all infallibilities whatsoever. And if God could ever *rightly* override human limitations in the manner essential to the communication of infallible information, the extreme economy with which He does so would be an insoluble problem. See below, pp. 174 ff.

of their own times and of their own lives, and the revelation consists in the coincidence of the events and the prophets' appreciation of them. The events and the interpretation of their significance need not be, and in fact were not, always contemporary. Canon Lilley's remark that the typical medium of revelation is not the thinker but the seer,<sup>1</sup> is very true but not the whole truth. Reflective thought may often discover fuller significance in an event, particularly in its relation to other events, and thus more fully disclose its revelatory character. Yet the event itself is a fact and is, so to say, the material of revelation, and the recognition of it as such may unite those who do not interpret it alike; provided always that it be remembered that it is not simply as historical facts that events are revelatory, but only because they are significant facts.

Human personality, with its insights and values, is the culmination of the world-process hitherto. The world of nature constitutes a revelation of God, and man belongs to nature though he transcends its levels below himself. It is therefore in human history that the revelation of God is most clearly seen. God, being personal, can be most fully revealed only in and through persons, and it is the personal that persons can understand best: it follows that the clearest revelation of God is to be looked for only in a person in personal relations with other persons. What is thus

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Lilley, *Religion and Revelation*, p. 145, an excellent little book.

to be looked for, Christianity affirms to be found in the person of Jesus the Christ. It teaches that in the personality, in the spirit, and in the teaching of Jesus, God is unveiled as fully as He can be to mortal eyes and within the limitations of human nature, in such wise that Jesus is not only the founder of Christianity but is himself the essence of its gospel. That 'God so loved the world' as Himself to submit to the conditions which could alone reveal His nature as men could best understand it, implies a conception of God and of the value of human life which is the centre of the Christian gospel, and which came to mankind through Jesus, if it was not thus explicitly stated in his words. The most distinctive element in historic Christianity, in the words of Dr. Edwyn Bevan, is that 'the inner Reality of the Universe has looked into human eyes through the eyes of Jesus Christ'. Yet Jesus himself, as the late Mr. Emmet said, 'left no code, no book, no system: he left only himself.'<sup>1</sup>

About the year 30, as we now reckon time, there arose within the existing Jewish church a small band of men inspired with a marvellous devotion to a person and with a message of his significance. They formed the nucleus of a religious fellowship which rapidly spread beyond the tiny land of its origin and became a great society extending throughout the Roman world. That society has profoundly affected

<sup>1</sup> *The Modern Churchman*, vol. xi, p. 228, and see below, p. 156.

the subsequent history of a large part of the world from that time to this. It and its message have been the means of uplifting, inspiring and sustaining the religious and moral life of men of all races<sup>1</sup> to an extent and to a level which, at its best, is unequalled in the history of man. If it has often lost its first radiance and has at times exhibited beyond parallel the perversions to which religion is liable, it has shown an amazing power of self-cleansing and recuperation by returning to its own professed source; it has not infrequently revised its corrupted teaching in the light of its own highest content; and it still exists, recognizably distinct from other religions in spite of the wide differences of form and content by which as a whole it is characterized. The original members of this society regarded it as continuous with a movement whose history went back at least to the time of Abraham in the twenty-first century before its founder's age. They were convinced that all the long history and the hopes of their forefathers, and all the Divine promises of which the Old Testament is the record, God had now fulfilled in fuller measure, if in a different sense, than had been anticipated. This fulfilment they recognized in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of a Person, and in the continued presence and power of his Spirit in their society and in their own hearts. Of him it could be said with

<sup>1</sup> Not, of course, of all races equally. It is a strange fact that though the founder of Christianity was a Jew, his religion has never had an influence among Semitic peoples comparable to that it has exercised among those indebted to Graeco-Roman culture.

St. Paul: "For how many soever the promises of God, in him is the yea."

Now without that faith and that burning conviction, the evidence for the dawn of Christian faith and life which we call the New Testament would never have existed. The Christian gospel is thus not something which, in its fullness, can be extracted from the New Testament books: they themselves are the result of the gospel and tell of its sources. But their writers all assume that the basis and the justification of their message were actual events, which had happened before the eyes of men. Certain of their books attempt an outline record of some of those events.

Christianity is rightly described as a historical religion, and this means far more than the obvious fact that it now has a history of some nineteen centuries. It means that the excellence of Christianity, and one of its great bulwarks, is that it was not merely or mainly evoked and projected from the religious needs, distresses and imaginings of men, but that it rests upon a firm foundation of particular historical events of which the basic Christian doctrines are the most adequate interpretation. 'Suffered under Pontius Pilate' is no insignificant article of the historic Christian creed: it fixes what is regarded as God's supreme self-manifestation to a definite place and period in the world's history. It may be said that the object of Christian faith is not the earthly life of Jesus but the living Christ and his Spirit manifest and active in the Christian church and in the hearts of believers; and it

is true that the name of Jesus has come to mean more, almost immeasurably more, than any record of the facts of his earthly life. But all this has in the past presupposed, and must always logically presuppose, belief in the real existence of and in certain justified propositions about, one Jesus who is the Christ. Apart from that belief and those propositions, or some of them, there would be little reason and no necessity to talk about 'the living Christ'. All that 'Christ' has meant and means to the Christian has depended and must depend upon the belief that he is one and the same as the Jesus who lived among men. The New Testament writer who sets forth the most exalted estimate of the person of Christ, the author of the writings attributed to St. John, is the one who insists most strongly that the Divine immanent activity, or the Logos, was made flesh, that is, took human nature, in the historical person Jesus Christ. It is this which gives to Christianity its distinctive place among the world's religions. Islam makes no comparable claim for its historical founder. Hinduism cares nothing for history. Buddhism, though it had a historical founder, does not involve a truly historical view of the world-process. For Christianity the course of events in this world is not merely a symbol of a reality in essence independent of it. Certain events which happened in time are of supreme significance. No other religion assigns to its founder any position comparable to that assigned by Christians to Jesus, a position which to them has been the chief glory of



their religion and its greatest scandal to many who have rejected it.

The application of modern scientific methods of historical criticism to the records of the life of Jesus has often created the gravest concern to those who have held the historical Christian estimate of the person of Christ. In the modern period the fragmentary records we call the gospels have been sifted with an almost incredible thoroughness: they have been examined again and again in a detached, scientific spirit, and analyses have been and are to-day being made which resemble those of sub-atomic physics for minuteness. Years of close study are necessary before anyone can now engage in the literary and historical criticism of the gospels with any hope of usefully advancing such research, or even acquire a thorough knowledge of what has been done. The history of such criticism is littered with ingenious and, for a time, fairly widely accepted theories now discarded. It is impossible here to give any summary of this vast undertaking that would not be almost ludicrously misrepresentative: I can but briefly refer to some aspects of the modern study of the New Testament and some general considerations regarding it, which are most relevant to the main theme of this lecture.

The days are gone and will never return when it was possible to regard the records of the ministry of Jesus as their own self-evidence of historical reliability. To-day, any attempts to maintain the literal

accuracy of the gospels<sup>1</sup> as history are self-condemned by the tortuous ingenuity which alone can give such attempts even a measure of plausibility: they are relics of the discredited belief in a verbally inspired Biblical text. On the other hand, some radical critics who have entirely abandoned that superstition seem to be not wholly free of its effects: they are apt to attach an absurdly exaggerated significance to relatively unimportant inaccuracies and errors in the New Testament, such as none would attach to similar discrepancies in other historical evidence. Of course, even small discrepancies were of great importance when the entire books were thought to be Divinely guaranteed as infallibly correct in all their statements; but to suppose they are still so betrays somewhat of the aroma of the former superstition still clinging, like the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed, in quarters where one would least expect it. There are also those who, either in the interests of an extreme conservatism or of an almost limitless scepticism, arrange a procession of contradictions extracted from the works of New Testament scholars who take different views on issues where the available evidence is often slight. This is irreverent trifling with a great subject: it should always be ignored, together with

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the Synoptic gospels. In regard to the Fourth Gospel, I accept the widely held and massively supported opinion that it is not in the main a historical record, except in the sense noted above (p. 119), though it contains not a little which may be reliable history and in some points more historically accurate than the Synoptic gospels.

the fantastic efforts of those persons who seem to assume that no statement of fact by a New Testament writer can possibly be true if his own ingenuity can conjecture a motive for falsification. As we have noted before, religious faith is not the sole source and has no monopoly of credulity.

It is now generally recognized that all the books in the New Testament, being the work of members of the early Christian society, presuppose its faith and were written for its needs. Nearly all these documents were written before A.D. 100, during the first and formative periods of the life and faith of the Church. The gospels were not written as dispassionate records of fact for the instruction of the twentieth century, nor to pass the tests to which modern scientific historical study seeks to subject its sources: they were written by believers for believers, 'from faith to faith'. They are in no sense complete records. The facts about the life of Jesus which were preserved, employed in teaching and finally incorporated in the gospel narratives, were largely those of most interest to Christian faith. Believing that the end of the existing world-order was very near, the first generation of Christians was naturally not concerned to record a careful biography of Christ for the benefit of future generations; but this need not mean that they themselves were uninterested in the life and message of him whom they believed to be designated as the Son of God by resurrection from the dead. There is force in Dr. Henson's reminder that the religious mind

is peculiarly liable unconsciously to admit opinions which conflict with one another, and that forgetfulness of this patent fact is responsible for much of the dogmatism about the Apostolic age which so readily sets aside parts of the tradition because to us they are inconsistent with other parts of it.<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that at present there is wide difference of critical opinion as to the degree of historical accuracy of many apparent statements of fact in the gospels. They certainly contain a large amount of interpretation of what is recorded, and they reveal much of the needs and hopes of the primitive church. But many such issues can be left open without destroying the reliability of the main lines of the tradition. The material of the earliest gospel seems to be reducible to short anecdotes and narrative units upon which a framework has been imposed; but comparatively large blocks of anecdotes and sayings, particularly those relating to the Passion, seem to have been already arranged in approximately their present form long before St. Mark used them in his gospel. The most recent critical theory has suggested that the framework, or the outline order of the events, consists of short generalizing summaries created *ad hoc* by the Evangelist and designed to assist the transition from one group of sayings or anecdotes to another. But Professor Dodd has shown that this is extremely

<sup>1</sup> See H. H. Henson, Bishop of Durham, *Christian Morality*, p. 43. Chapter ii is full of sound sense bearing on the question of the general trustworthiness of the gospels.

unlikely. Merely by putting these alleged summaries together he found that they constitute a fairly coherent outline of the Galilean ministry. Such a continuous structure would hardly result from arbitrary and casual links supplied merely to make a connected story. There is sufficient reason for trusting that the primitive Church transmitted an outline of the ministry of Jesus with at least some regard to its topographical and chronological setting. The outline seems to have been too meagre to provide a suitable setting for all the detailed stories and sayings at Mark's disposal, many of which were no doubt already arranged in ways which cut across a truly chronological order. It would appear that the Marcan order is neither to be always trusted nor scornfully rejected, but that it represents a generally if not an invariably reliable succession of events.

An older type of New Testament criticism associated mainly with the great name of Harnack, the work of men who in religion favoured what is known as Liberal Protestantism, supposed critical historical study to disclose a primitive, wholly ethical and non-theological gospel, lived and taught by Jesus. The essence of his message was the Divine Fatherhood and human brotherhood, and the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. This earliest message soon gathered accretions from the earlier religious beliefs of the disciples of Jesus and from many other sources, largely pagan sources, and in this way developed into Catholic Christianity. The more modern type of criticism

claims to have made havoc of this picture: Jesus, so conceived, is held to be, as Schweitzer picturesquely put it, 'a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in a historical garb'. The strange supernaturalism in the gospels, the expectation of an imminent end to the existing world-order, Jesus as the judge of mankind, the inauguration of a new age—these elements, it is held, are fundamental in the gospels. Moreover it is said that these documents are only to be understood if we approach them with the Christ-myth<sup>1</sup> already in mind; that is to say, with the belief that one came down from heaven, was made man, suffered, died and rose again for the world's salvation. This 'myth' is said to be inextricably woven into the gospel narrative, which is much more the result of the story-creating tendencies and represents the propagandist needs of the early church than it is a record of historical fact. The latest type of gospel-criticism professes to be based on a minute comparison of the literary 'forms' of gospel anecdotes and sayings with

<sup>1</sup> It is very important that this term be correctly understood. As used in this connexion it is not necessarily implied that 'myth' means something resembling a fairy-story. The word is used in its older meaning, representing something that is not strictly science, history, or philosophy, but is the attempt to set forth in pictorial form what is felt to be above and beyond expression in the categories of formal thought. It denotes 'truth embodied in a tale', by which means truth can be conveyed to those who are unable to apprehend truth with equal clarity in other forms. In this sense 'myth' is closely akin to 'parable', and is to be sharply contrasted with its use when 'Christ-myth' describes the quite ridiculous theory that Jesus never existed as a historical person.

similar literary parallels culled from a very wide range and variety of sources.

It goes without saying that the study of the gospels must be entirely free to reach such conclusions as the best methods, most reliable knowledge, and soundest human judgment can reach. No ecclesiastical authority can either prescribe those conclusions or invalidate them. There are many particular problems and a host of detailed questions upon which no one not an expert, unless he be a fool, will suppose himself qualified to pronounce, while those who are qualified to express opinions which have a right to claim attention, for the most part speak tentatively, except perhaps when over-stimulated by the exigencies of controversy. Men who do not share the spirit of Christ may develop studies which are an elaborate means of missing the significance of all that is religiously important in the gospels; but it is also true that Christian discipleship and personal sanctity do not in themselves confer competence to decide questions of scholarship or of historical criticism. Yet notwithstanding the existence of many particular problems, and of many more details, which are open questions, the Christian believer need not fear that there is no reliable knowledge about the earthly life of Jesus, about what manner of man he was in whom Christianity sees the supreme revelation of God in history. In the last resort, if we were required to do so, we could say with the late Professor F. C. Burkitt, one of the most learned and open-

minded New Testament scholars of our generation, that

the Christian has hardly need to claim more from the scientific historian than that the life of Jesus Christ on earth inspired the canonical Gospels, made the Evangelists write as they did, made the Gospels what they are.<sup>1</sup>

In fact the Christian may most reasonably claim much more, as Dr. Burkitt did. There are several weighty considerations on which we may trust the reliability of the main lines of the tradition in spite of the existence of non-historical elements within it and of the fact that many questions cannot be decided with more than probability, if at all. Thus, while the new light which the latest type of gospel-criticism, called 'Form-criticism', sheds upon the formation of the gospel-tradition should be welcomed, there is no justification for the assumption that in its main lines that tradition is the creation of the story-making activities of the earliest church in providing for its own needs to illustrate its gospel, consolidate its life, and further its propaganda. There is no reason to doubt that the speeches contained in the first part of Acts and certain passages in the earlier Epistles of St. Paul disclose the form and outline contents of Apostolic preaching. These were as follows: Old Testament prophecies and promises have been fulfilled; a Saviour of the seed of David has come in the person of Jesus, proved by his works to be Messiah:

<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, p. 27.



he was crucified and has risen according to the Scriptures<sup>1</sup> and has inaugurated the new age by the sending of the Spirit: what has thus begun will shortly be consummated. Now no doubt this framework of primitive Christian preaching lies behind the first three gospels, and no doubt much of the narrative material contained in them was valued and preserved because it illustrated and gave more vivid colour to that framework. But the examples of such preaching as survive elsewhere in the New Testament did not include stories of the ministry of Jesus or reports of his sayings. Except for very few events of the passion, and the facts of his death and resurrection, the New Testament notoriously shows little direct interest in the kind of material which came to form the contents of the gospels. On the other hand, few of the characteristic ideas of St. Paul are reflected in the gospels, and there is practically nothing in them suggestive of that striking document known as the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Again, many of the passages which Form-criticism calls 'myths' and regards as containing little of historical value, are not so classified by their literary form, but rather by the critic's view of their contents. Similarly the so-called 'legends,' *i.e.* passages read during worship or for instruction, are stories of very diverse types and have no one literary 'form'. The fact is that to regard literary forms in first-century

<sup>1</sup> This means according to the Old Testament as read in the new light which the coming of Jesus had made possible.

writings as affording any reliable indications of the historical value of what is recorded, is a highly speculative and very precarious procedure. It seems to me that Form-criticism has not very much to do with historical criticism; and that in so far as its exponents issue judgments upon the historical value of the material the forms of which they classify, the basis of their judgments is theological and subjective, quite as much so as were those of Harnack and the Liberal Protestants, and in some respects less well-grounded than theirs.

Similarly in regard to the 'Christ-myth'<sup>1</sup> as a more developed form of early Apostolic preaching and its alleged influence in creating or moulding what has been wrongly taken for genuine history in the gospels; undoubtedly the facts recorded about Jesus are interpreted facts, for only significant facts could have religious value, and the interpretation is always interpretation of more than a single fact or event. That is true of all history. But there is a great deal in the gospels which reveals no traces of having been influenced, still less created, by the 'Christ-myth.' If, as is evident from the New Testament outside the gospels, the early church did not concern itself to anything like the extent of our modern concern with the deeds and sayings, the earthly life, of Jesus, then in the main the material in the gospels is certainly less likely to have been the product of Christian theology

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 125, and the footnote on that page for the meaning of this term.

than something which has survived in spite of it. The fact that it was apparently not extensively used in early apologetic is more reason for trusting it as fairly genuine history. Professor Burkitt writes thus of St. Mark's Gospel:

It does not sound to me like *Gemeindetheologie*, the unconscious secretion of a community of believers. Nothing but a strong element of personal reminiscence could have produced it. . . . There is a good deal of idealization, of unhistorical embroidery, in the work, but the outline seems to me to be derived from real memory of real events.<sup>1</sup>

It is not possible, in a single lecture, to do more than indicate thus summarily the broad general grounds on which I believe the gospels to give us a great deal of trustworthy information about Jesus.<sup>2</sup> But whatever view be taken of this question it seems to me hard to over-estimate its importance if anything like the position assigned to Jesus in historic Christianity is to be maintained. That estimate of his significance as the supreme revelation of God in terms of human nature can only be made by an act of faith: there is not and never has been, nor conceivably could be, evidence which could *prove* Jesus to have that significance. None the less, in justifying its faith in Christ as reasonable the genius of Christianity has been to point to the facts and ask for their systematic interpretation; but if there is next to no reliable information about the manner of man he was, what

<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of Theological Studies*, April 1933, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> See further on pp. 135 ff.

facts can be pointed to in commending the doctrine of Divine incarnation in Jesus? The faith of the early church in conjunction with trustworthy historical events and information about Jesus is one thing: the faith of the early church without them is another and a quite different thing. Much that might have led first-century Christians to an interpretation of Jesus which culminated in the Incarnation-doctrine would most probably not impress us in the same way. For example, they seem to have interpreted their beliefs about the approaching end of the age, the judgment, the part to be borne by Jesus therein, in a word, their eschatology, in a rather crude and literal fashion: they also certainly believed that Jesus had been seen alive after his death. Put those two elements together and we have all the data necessary to account for early Christological belief. But belief in one of those elements, *in the form in which the first Christians held it*, namely, the eschatology, is quite impossible for us. It may well be that in the light of other knowledge about the person, life and teaching of Jesus we can see a deeper and more abiding significance in that eschatology, much more important than the forms it assumed in early Christian minds; but to arrive reasonably at that conclusion we need reliable historical knowledge.

If revelation consists in the interaction between the Divinely guided event and human minds similarly guided to apprehend its significance,<sup>1</sup> we cannot

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 114 f.

affirm a supreme revelation in Jesus Christ if we know extremely little about him as a historical personage. Thus in my view the Liberal Protestants and Modernists who claimed a large and secure knowledge of Jesus and regarded him as the supreme teacher of ethical Theism, while holding loosely or abandoning some statements in traditional Christological formularies, were nearer to historic Christian theology than are those who combine an affirmation of belief in traditional Christology with radical historical scepticism in regard to the gospels.<sup>1</sup>

The combination of creedal orthodoxy with such scepticism seems to me an impossible undertaking. Radical scepticism as to the historical basis of Christianity may indeed not destroy much that is of surpassing value which nineteen centuries of Christianity have brought to light. The truth of Theism, the truths of forgiveness and of grace, and much else in the religious life, may still be matters of experience and of a sound theology. There is also a real sense in which, whatever in the gospels commends itself to reason and conscience as valuable and true, is indeed valuable and true, however it came to light. But the basis of any doctrine of the person of Christ, such as has been central in Christianity, depends and must depend on *how* it came to light and *why* it ever came to be included in the gospels. To claim in one breath that the Divine appeared on earth in Jesus of Nazareth

<sup>1</sup> I express no view as to which attitude is more akin to the *ethos* of the Christian religion.

in any sense which may not be affirmed of anyone else, and then in the next breath to say that we know very little about Jesus as a historical figure, and have little more than what story-making tendencies and the missionary and controversial needs of the primitive church created, seems to me a grotesque claim.

If it be said *with reference to the historic Christian estimate of Christ* 'If the factual veracity of the gospels goes their spiritual substance remains', I cannot imagine that people will feel that this enables them to accept the central Christian doctrine, except perhaps the few who have succumbed to the influences of a perverted sophistication and for whom a deception more or less does not morally or intellectually signify. When a Barthian in theology who accepts the very negative historical criticism of Bultmann affirms of the resurrection of Jesus that it 'is an event within the sphere of God's activity, that it is to be understood as within the sphere of God's activity and in no way otherwise', I suppose that all who have ever believed that doctrine intelligently would agree; but the reasonable Christian theologian, no less than the plain man, cannot allow scepticism about the life of Jesus or the logical consequences of such scepticism, to be overawed and silenced by a statement that 'the resurrection is to be understood neither as outward nor inward, neither mystically nor as a supernatural phenomenon, nor as historical',—and he will do well to call nonsense by its name.

Historical scepticism does not, of course, mean that

the Incarnation doctrine has been proved false: it means that there are no adequate grounds for affirming it, and that as a serious issue it no longer arises. Appeals to Christian religious experience cannot then avail to establish it. Religious experience there was, and it was no doubt of primary importance in the development of that doctrine; but that experience only came to persons within a society which believed the facts of Jesus' life and resurrection to be real events in the same world as that in which they lived. God had done these things, whereof they were witnesses. Had they not so believed there is no reason to suppose that their theology would have been what it was. Faith cannot restore that of which the historical understanding robs us. The modern tendency to minimize the importance of historical events as too insignificant to be sources of revelation and of religious truth is less grounded in reason than in emotional idiosyncrasy. The idea that there are so-called truths of reason and of religion, which are valid of Reality yet independent of all contingent facts, such as those of history, is baseless and erroneous.<sup>1</sup> Those who in the past drew a real distinction between 'the Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith' were at least logical in as far as their contrast presupposed different beliefs as to what had actually happened in the life of Jesus.

There is no doubt that what the gospels record of the life of Jesus and of his teaching, and record as historical facts, together with the central Christian

<sup>1</sup> See F. R. Tennant, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 238.

doctrine about the significance of Jesus, have exercised the profoundest influence upon the religious life of mankind. Whether or no the doctrine lies on the surface of the facts is secondary: what is of primary importance for the doctrine is the historical reliability of a sufficient amount of what is related as fact. Neither the facts nor the doctrine in which they are interpreted can, if separated from each other, be accounted for simply as an expression of the religious consciousness. I cannot see that it ever was so or can be so to-day. The person of Christ can be central in our religion so long as history shows us a historical figure whom we can reasonably, morally and religiously recognize as not unworthy to bear the significance Christianity has accorded him. Whatever our present religious experience, we can only reasonably associate it with the living and glorified Christ if we have good reasons, which from the nature of the case must include good historical reasons, for the faith that our idea of a living and glorified Christ differs from erroneous ideas in having a factual counterpart.

It is both logically and historically most probable that Jesus himself should have been such as to account for the impression made by him and to explain why men came to believe that they saw the light of the knowledge of the glory of God revealed in him. That they did so, and at an early date, is certain. The fatal weakness of so many modern attempts to explain the rise of Christianity without assigning the all-important



place to Jesus is that they fail to explain the history. The outline preserved in the gospels, alike of his personality and of his actions and teaching, does account for what followed. Nor is there any adequate reason to doubt that the gospel outline preserves the memory of real events, provided we do not look for a modern scientific precision where something different was intended. It does not in the least follow that the events of Jesus' ministry and his teaching were falsified or substantially modified because they were used in Christian preaching and teaching. Nor should we assume that the Evangelists were unaware of the difference between fact and fiction, or indifferent to it. They do not conceal that their purpose in writing was to edify and to teach. The one who explicitly confesses this purpose also insists that he intends to write a truthful record.<sup>1</sup> The Bishop of Durham's words are relevant to this point. He writes:

No doubt the modern historian, equipped with exact statistics and an elaborate criticism of sources, familiar with the teachings of modern science, and protected from error by many devices which were inaccessible to the ancients, attains a far higher level of accuracy than the ancient, but he is neither more honest, nor more discerning, nor more intelligent, nor necessarily, in the total effect of his work, more truthful.<sup>2</sup>

Modern history does not essentially differ from what the Evangelists understood by history.

There is also sufficient reason for holding that the

<sup>1</sup> Luke i. 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Henson, *Christian Morality*, p. 41.

formation of the main outline of the gospel tradition belongs to a time very shortly after the crucifixion. Dr. Dibelius, a leading exponent of 'Form-criticism', admits that

we may assert that the weighty elements in the tradition had become fixed in the first twenty years after Jesus' death. We may assume that all the elements of which St. Mark's Gospel consists received their formulation in Greek at latest between A.D. 50 and 70. Thus the weightiest part of the tradition had been developed at a time while eye-witnesses still lived, and when the events were only about a generation old. It is not to be wondered at that this part of the tradition remained relatively unaltered.<sup>1</sup>

Again, St. Paul had contacts with the original disciples of Jesus, and knew well some members of the early Jerusalem church. The author of Acts, who is certainly the same man who wrote the Third Gospel, was in all probability a companion of St. Paul for considerable periods of time. The early Apostolic age therefore provides direct evidence that the Gospel account of the life and teaching of Jesus was in general the same as that known to people contemporary with him and with St. Paul.

German scholarly thoroughness has ransacked the literary remains of the ancient world, and from that great and wide sea things creeping innumerable have been brought forth as parallels to New Testament ideas and phrases in the attempt to recover their precise historical meaning. No pains have been spared

<sup>1</sup> M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, p. 294.

to examine the earlier history and contemporary non-Christian usage of New Testament words. By this means no little light, of a kind, has illumined the beginnings of Christian faith and life. It is also evident that considerable use of the Old Testament has been made throughout the New; while ideas, imagery and language from Jewish Apocalypses also exercised a marked influence and particularly in the gospels. These Apocalypses described how, when the evils of their time should have run to their full development, God, either Himself by direct intervention or through the agency of a supernatural being sometimes called Messiah and sometimes not, would vindicate His rule and sweep away the wicked. Not through merely human agencies but by a direct, Divine, miraculous intervention God's sovereignty and His kingdom would become actual. These writers developed ideas, found in some of the prophets, of convulsions of physical nature as accompaniments of the Divine judgment, and of the promise of a new heaven and earth. They told in a wealth of detail what 'the day of the Lord' would be like and what were the signs of its coming; and it was near at hand. There is no doubt that these Apocalypses are one source of some of the language and imagery in which New Testament writers try to set forth the significance of Jesus, and of which there is no reasonable doubt that he himself made use. The precise meaning of this language and imagery in its New Testament setting is often hard to determine. In Jesus' own use it can-

not bear the same meaning as in the Apocalypses because his conception of the nature of God is so fundamentally different from theirs.<sup>1</sup>

Two things, however, seem clear. First, ideas and language, symbols and imagery, derived from various sources, Jewish, Greek, Hellenistic, or others, and of varying dates, when all applied to a real human life such as Jesus lived, cannot mean exactly what they had meant before. For the understanding of their Christian meaning their New Testament setting is more important than their past history, important though the knowledge of that history is. A great deal in the critical reconstructions of the alleged 'real facts' of Christian beginnings is vitiated by a tacit assumption that the value of the contents of the New Testament is just the value of the agglomeration of 'parallels' or 'sources' which may elsewhere be found for them. It has sometimes seemed almost to be assumed that neither Jesus nor his first followers were capable of originating anything or assigning a new and distinctive significance to language and ideas, imagery and symbols which came to their hands from other sources. Secondly, in our modern world, on a much vaster scale than in the ancient world, there is a multitude of conflicting ideas and ideals, and strivings after fuller and better life; but they do not arrange

<sup>1</sup> The differences between the use of and appeal to Old Testament prophecy which are attributed to Jesus, and what is clearly the Evangelists' use of and appeal to it, are very interesting and significant. I may perhaps refer to my article on this subject in *The Modern Churchman*, vol. xix, p. 653 ff.

themselves into a power able to transform the world into something better than it has known before. In the New Testament there is an assemblage of similes, symbols, images and ideas; these, if merely collected together and preserved with the same meanings which they had in the sources to which they may be traced, are utterly inconsistent, little more than a tangled jungle.

What demands explanation is the association of all of them around the person, life, teaching, death and resurrection of the historical individual Jesus, and the transforming power of the whole process. The greatness of his personality supplies the only intelligible explanation. The association of such varied elements was due to attempts to set forth his significance. Those elements are the moulds into which a bewildering yet inspiring experience flowed; many of them it soon broke, and in none of them could it be wholly confined. The word 'Messiah' had gathered various meanings before it was used of Jesus; but when used of a human life such as his was, none of those earlier meanings exactly fits. By its application to him the title gains a new meaning. Similarly the word 'Logos' had had a long and varied history, but as used in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel and then applied to the actual life of Jesus in the sentence, 'the Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us', by and in that very application 'Logos' receives a meaning which in the totality of its content is new. Dr. Major's words put the issue very clearly:

The critical tendency which in the name of History seeks to show that Christianity is an eclectic religion having its origin in various aspirations and tendencies, cults and philosophies, in the first century of our era . . . fails to do justice to the personality of Jesus as constituting the magnetic centre which attracted all these things to itself.<sup>1</sup>

The same point is emphasized by a writer with unrivalled knowledge of religions:

The great religious movements which have stirred humanity to its depths and altered the beliefs of nations spring ultimately from the conscious and deliberate efforts of extraordinary minds, not from the unconscious co-operation of the multitude.<sup>2</sup>

Or again in words written over sixty years ago:

The tradition of followers suffices to insert any number of marvels, and may have inserted all the miracles which he is reputed to have wrought. But who among his disciples or among their proselytes was capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus or of imagining the life and character revealed in the Gospels? Certainly not the fishermen of Galilee; as certainly not St. Paul, whose character and idiosyncrasies were of a totally different sort; still less the early Christian writers in whom nothing is more evident than that the good which was in them was all derived, as they always professed that it was derived, from the higher source.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. D. A. Major, *English Modernism*, Noble Lectures, 1925, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Part iv, third edition, i, p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> J. S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, p. 253. Quoted by Henson *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Once more, those who choose to minimize the significance of the ethical teaching of Jesus often point out that it contains very little that cannot be paralleled, often verbally, in the Rabbinical literature; but they do not usually emphasize that a whole wilderness of rubbish has to be searched to find the parallels. It is the concentration of them in the thin little books of the gospels which is so significant. True originality, particularly in ethical and religious teaching, does not consist in the enunciation of a mass of startlingly new disclosures,<sup>1</sup> but in new associations and changes of emphasis which transform the significance of what is already familiar.<sup>2</sup> The great essentials of Jesus' message, permeated by one spirit, harmonize with his personality as revealed in the main tradition in the Synoptic gospels; and there are no more reasons to-day than there ever were which make it in the least likely that the general outline of the portrait and the teaching was the creation of any group of disciples, or anything less than a generally true reflection of fact.

Among the New Testament writers there is no real difference of attitude towards Jesus, though they say different things about him. They give an impression that they are searching among current and sometimes ancient language, ideas, symbols and imagery in an attempt to find categories in which to express more

<sup>1</sup> When such are alleged to be made, they are invariably largely nonsense.

<sup>2</sup> See below, pp. 185 ff.

adequately the impression Jesus made, and what they had come to understand his significance to be. It is not my purpose so much as to outline the process by which the Church formulated the historic doctrine of Christ's person. I wish, however, to submit a few observations relevant to that doctrine as it may reasonably be held in the modern world.

No doctrine of Christ can have much religious value except as it is brought into the closest relation with the cosmic process and its religious interpretation. It is also vain to begin by extracting from the gospels a mental image of Jesus and then to ask how, being man, he can also be divine. The issue does not arise in that way, nor did primitive Christians or the early church so conceive it. For them Jesus appeared as the culmination and fulfilment of a long, Divinely guided process in history. It was what *God had done in and through him* which led them to reflect upon what that implied about his person. And so it must still be. To interpret Jesus involves far more than the interpretation of him as a single fact. The interpretation of that one particular fact, or series of facts, is one element in ideas and beliefs about the world, and will differ, or may even have no significance at all, if those ideas and beliefs about the world are radically changed.<sup>1</sup> The particular significance of one event or series of events is dependent upon their setting in a view of the world, and will be interpreted in terms of

<sup>1</sup> Dr. W. R. Matthews justly remarks that to read the gospels with no presuppositions is itself a presupposition.



it. This is the root source of those difficulties which the doctrine of Christ, in its historic and traditional form, creates and will continue to create in the modern world. The traditional form of that doctrine cohered satisfactorily with the world-view which formed the setting in which it was developed and in the light of which it was set forth; but that world-view has changed. If a particular formulation of doctrine is removed from its ancient setting and simply inserted, in its ancient form, into the modern setting, it creates insoluble perplexities, cannot be assimilated with knowledge or probable belief, and thus becomes less significant or may even lose its meaning. This may be illustrated, with reference to the doctrine of Christ, by some words of the late Dr. Rashdall:

If 'Divine' and 'human' are thought of as mutually exclusive terms, if God is thought of as simply the Maker of man, if man is thought of as merely a machine or an animal having no community of nature with the Universal Spirit, who is the cause or source or 'ground' of the existence alike of Nature and of other spirits, then indeed it would be absurd to maintain that one human being, and one only, was both God and man at the same time. But such a view of the relation of God and man would not at the present day be accepted by any philosophy which finds any real place for God in its conception of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, it was in such conceptions of 'Divine' and 'human', and of others equally unassimilable in a

<sup>1</sup> H. Rashdall, *Jesus: Human and Divine*, p. 17.

modern world-view, that the person of Jesus was interpreted in the traditional doctrine we inherit.

In previous lectures we considered what human personality is, and also saw good reason to think of God as the world-Ground, a living personal Spirit, alike the Creator and the Sustainer of the world-process. His immanent sustaining activity need not and ought not to be conceived as a mechanically uniform constancy of action, but rather as personal action which may be varied as the developing world-process requires, in order to realize the unchanging purposes of a personal God, and that without putting science or other human knowledge to confusion. This does not involve the occasional interjection of some Divine reserves of power, normally inactive, from 'outside' the developing world-process: it is but the appropriate manifestation of the constant immanent and personal activity of God. The Divine activity, so conceived, is manifested to us in varying degrees at different stages of the world's evolution, and most fully hitherto in human personality. The personality of Jesus can only have significance for that historical process if he is really within it, and if the process itself is real and has religious significance. To affirm, as some modern theology does, the nothingness of man, is to make history and Jesus alike of no significance whatever.

It is the existence of all human personality within and amidst the operations of natural law which alone can make any doctrine of Divine Incarnation con-

ceivable.<sup>1</sup> In all human personality there is that which transcends all natural levels below personality. From the point of view of those lower natural levels, there is a super-naturalistic element in personality, which is akin to its highest and transcendent manifestation in Jesus,—if history discloses facts which stimulate faith and make it possible so to interpret him. Any Incarnation doctrine which can find a place in that world-view which alone is proper to our knowledge, (any doctrine, that is, which shall be really integrated with that world-view, as distinct from lying as an unassimilable and non-significant element within it) must be set forth as a manifestation of that personal Divine immanent activity which sustains the whole world-process, and which, in New Testament language, we may call the 'Logos' or 'Word' of God.

This 'Logos' is operative and directive in the beginning and throughout the course of the creative process; at a particular stage of that process His activity is manifested in the emergence of human personality; at a particular stage His activity was manifested as completely as is possible in human conditions in the personality of Jesus, whom faith may affirm to be 'the Word made flesh', manifested as the supreme revelation of God to man for the purpose of human salvation.<sup>2</sup> There need be no difficulty in the fact of

<sup>1</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> In ancient language we could speak of the Logos conceived as an eternal element in the Divine nature as *λόγος ἐνδιάθετος* (the indwelling Word); conceived as immanent and operating in the creative evolutionary process as *λόγος προφορικός* (the Word pre-

the supreme manifestation of God occurring at a particular stage of historical development, or in asserting it to be final in the sense that there is in Christ that which no development will transcend or take us beyond. In a developing process the need is for *finality of direction*, not finality in the sense of the complete realization of all the potentialities of human nature; while a supreme revelation of God in human history at the end of it would be the one place where the revelation would be entirely superfluous. If those whose minds have been deeply immersed in the traditional form of the doctrine of the personality of Jesus find an account of him on the lines I have briefly sketched to be 'inadequate', what they generally mean is that it is inadequate if transplanted back into the world-view in the light of which the significance of Jesus was first interpreted. But that is to compare things which will in no wise 'scale together' but are incommensurable.

If, as we are entitled to believe, enough is known about Jesus to make it reasonable to inquire about his authority for us, what is its nature? The answer is not in doubt. It is axiomatic that, however much a man may be responsible for the fact that his conscience

ceeding forth); conceived as manifesting itself in human personality as λόγος σπερματικός (the implanted Word); conceived as finally manifested in Jesus as λόγος ἑνσαρκος (the Word made flesh). For a good outline modern presentation of the doctrine of Christ's person, see W. R. Matthews's contribution to the volume, *The Future of Christianity*, edited by Sir James Marchant.

informs him as it does, he is nevertheless not to be morally justified if he acts otherwise than as conscience prescribes. The call of God unmistakably heard in conscience is the only authority to which absolute, unqualified obedience is due. This must limit the demands of every other authority. Unquestioning obedience to any external authority, without recognizing the limitations of all authority, is a mark either of the infancy or of the corruption of religion. The exercise of this type of external authority has been prominent in religion and has never assumed greater pretensions than in its exercise in the name of Jesus. He knew it well. It is the more remarkable that it does not appear that he ever claimed this type of authority for himself. He demanded a free response to himself, but is reported to have discouraged it if made because of the impressiveness of his deeds. He rejected the type of authority which marked the institutional religion of his day. 'He taught them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes', and that is precisely the impression which his recorded teaching still creates in us. The difference between his authority and that of the Scribes and Pharisees was that his teaching was to be self-authenticating, whereas theirs was not. Theirs was a form of truth transmitted with scrupulous accuracy: the form was co-extensive with the truth itself. They 'denied the power thereof' because, though wishing men to realize its truth, they overlooked the fact that this result can only be effectively secured by committing the truth unreservedly to

personal experience as the ultimate test of its reality. They taught *upon* authority: Jesus taught *with* authority. A gulf divides the two.

Allowing for all accidental modifications and legendary accretions which may have affected the transmission of Jesus' teaching before its recording in the Synoptic gospels, the greatness of his personality and the excellence of his character, his spirit and the general nature of his teaching, we can reliably ascertain. The recorded teaching is marked by an individuality, a challenging boldness, and an unity of spirit which stamp it as certainly not a collection of different opinions created by various individuals between A.D. 30 and 70. It is a fairly homogeneous whole coming from one teacher of immense spiritual power. Whatever the verdict about the gospel miracles, of what sort they were or what the measure of their improbability, the judgment is likely to remain that a solid nucleus of 'mighty works' was done by Jesus. They support the impression, derived unmistakably from his teaching which needs no such support, that we have to do with a strong, incalculable and most gracious personality. If the miracles that seem to contradict this impression cannot be hid, criticism can easily account for their presence in the narratives on no more unreasonable or arbitrary assumptions than those justified by most of the miracle stories themselves and by other acts and words of Jesus. The miracles related of Jesus are in any case in striking contrast to those of earlier and later miracle-monger-

ing; they chiefly reveal a desire to lessen human misery and are in harmony with his personality and teaching.

Thus the basis of the authority of Jesus for us is that both he and his teaching have to do with what, in every time and place, is fundamental to man's well-being, namely his relation to his fellow-men, to the world in which he lives and to God in Whom both he and the world exist. Jesus' revelation in himself, and in his words and deeds, of the nature of God as the Father of love, is unique in emphasis, extent and application. No doubt that is not the whole either of his revelation or of his teaching; but it is impossible that, for one who so continuously lived in the realized presence of God, his thought of God could have been other than the fundamental thing, in the light of which all else must be interpreted. He lived the life of filial trust in God which he taught, and lived it through tragedy to the end. No doubt there is much that is good, of immense value and even necessary in full and worthy human life as we must live it which finds little or no place in the life or the teaching of Jesus as preserved for us; but that is a wholly secondary consideration. What is of profound importance is that, in the actual circumstances of his human life he both lived out and taught the basic values and revealed the central purpose of life into living relations with which *all else* must be brought if it is ever to realize its potential worth and take its proper place in human life. Even if he held an eschatology which

foreshortened the perspective of the future (a fairly constant feature of the prophetic consciousness), the foregoing claim for the authority of his teaching is not thereby undermined. To 'live this day as if thy last' would not require us to abandon any of the inspiring principles of the ethic of Jesus, even though it might make us more willing to give our coats to those who would take away our cloaks than we are normally willing to do. The inspiring principles of truth and love, righteousness and mercy remain constant, whether the end be near or far.

The teaching of Jesus as preserved for us consists mainly of occasional utterances. It is true that the appropriate principle determines the occasional teaching; but this fact, as Dr. Henson observes, does not necessarily mean that it is the *only* principle appropriate to some *other* occasion. The authority of Jesus' teaching is not, and was never intended to be, of a kind which exempts men from employing their own moral reason and following the leading of experience.<sup>1</sup> But in revealing to man his true nature as a son in relation to God as Father, and the true and unchanging springs of worthy human conduct, Jesus revealed what men most need to know and to assimilate. If we are to live nobly, the way is in him, and he inspires the wish so to live whenever we lay ourselves

<sup>1</sup> This is the main reason for that "unique genius of assimilation which distinguishes Christianity from every other religion" and why it is that "Christianity now carries the garnered wealth of centuries of history." See H. H. Henson, *Christian Morality*, chapters vi and vii.



open to the influence of his appeal. He never asked men to accept what he taught merely because he taught it, and we to-day do not believe in and accept his teaching merely because he gave it: rather, one of the main grounds of belief in him is that he both taught as he did and was himself the illustration of his teaching. His appeal was and is to reason and to conscience.

In the last resort the truth of an ideal is always a matter of intuitive judgment. However much we may employ reason in considering it before the judgment is made, it cannot, in the scientific sense, be 'proved': its truth must always depend on the solemn Amen which it awakens in our hearts. For the absence of that appeal no other arguments or tests of adequacy will quite make up. Jesus' sense of the reality and nearness of God and of the absolute demands of His rule, joined with that altogether holy life which left the impression (unconsciously conveyed by the gospels and certainly not deliberately created) that in him is no sin—it is this which brings us into the presence of God when we come within the full influence of Jesus. His authority consists in the fact that in this way he brings us face to face with the only right, ultimate authority. He does not, by word of command, force the human mind, for that in the last resort simply cannot be done. His authority is the natural power of life over life: it has no fixed or arbitrary centre or mode of expression. It increases as it becomes more and more also our own insight.

The final reason for accepting his authority is simply the reason why we see it is right to do so.

The authority of Jesus, if its nature is properly understood, is not much affected by the fact that the world of his earthly day was so different from ours. To what has already been said we may add the fact that we do not receive identical impressions of his teaching from the first three gospels, any more than his hearers received identical impressions of the significance of his words. Thus it is from St. Luke's Gospel alone that we learn that wealth and poverty were matters with which Jesus was much concerned. Again, he not only used vivid imagery, the details of which cannot be pressed without absurdity, but he undoubtedly also used hyperbole. Thus he did not mean as a literal precept that, while loving our enemies, we must hate our parents if we would be true disciples. He meant that the call of God, when unmistakably heard, must be absolute over all other obligations; but he did not mean that circumstances were irrelevant in our understanding of what the call of God may demand of us. Once more, no characteristic of his teaching has been more often noted than its *inwardness*, its emphasis on motive and intention. His sayings contain and reveal principles and ideals, not ready-made laws; and it is both arbitrary and hopeless to treat some of them as laws to be imposed literally and others as unrealizable counsels of perfection. This truth cannot be illustrated better than in some words of Dr. Rashdall:

Nobody ever could fulfil the demands of Christ merely as an act of obedience to external authority. How could you even try to love your neighbour as yourself merely because an external authority which you believed to be infallible had pronounced that it is the right thing to do? Not only could you not obey the demands of Christ: you could not even understand them unless in some measure and to some extent your conscience went with them. 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged.'<sup>1</sup>

Central in the teaching of Jesus was the theme of the Kingdom, or Kingship or Rule, of God, *i.e.* a state of life in which God's will should be accepted and done, as in heaven so on earth. His teaching consists in the main of occasional sayings relative to that ideal state, ideals realized in himself but which can only be realized fully when men live in the spiritual world of God as Jesus lived, while finding that world, as he found it, in the world of actual duty. He left it to his followers to devise forms in which the ideal could be actualized in any particular set of ever-changing circumstances. It is no valid criticism of the ideal or teaching of Jesus that it cannot be 'applied' (as the phrase goes) to modern conditions unless it can be shown that modern conditions are already what they ought to be. In all his teaching Jesus assumed that his words ought to meet with an answering assent from those to whom he spoke, though he knew that often it would not be so;

<sup>1</sup> *Principles and Precepts*, p. 15.

and there is no reason whatever to suppose that he would wish his ideals to be imposed by authority (for often their very nature makes them incapable of such imposition) when they do not appear to conscience to be applicable to present facts of life. They must commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Finally, when we reflect how great and how varied an experience supports that reading of the meaning of life and its values which is revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus to which, without compromise, he was faithful unto death, if we occasionally find in the gospel records sayings and a tone which we could wish to be absent, we have to weigh the possibilities that Jesus was misunderstood or misreported and whether the form of the saying is likely to have been influenced and modified by his followers' subsequent experiences; we should do this in the light of that impression of the greatness and surpassing goodness of his personality which the gospels certainly convey. At the worst, all we have to acknowledge is that there are a few sayings which seem to us to fall below the highest level, a fact which stands out the more clearly because of the light shed by that highest level. Modern New Testament criticism makes it absurd to base any far-reaching conclusions upon isolated passages in the gospels: we have not the requisite grounds of confidence that we have a record of the actual words which were spoken by Jesus. Nor are Christians committed to belief in his infallibility, for of infallibilities there is none.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 175 ff., 189 f.

spirit of Jesus' teaching as a whole stands beyond reproach, no less than does the animating spirit of his life and his works, and his authority is that which properly attaches to the supreme unveiling of the nature of God in personal relations with sons.

It is only in a qualified, derivative and secondary sense that the authority of Jesus can be claimed for any theological formulæ.<sup>1</sup> Just as God's grace does not ensure our sinlessness, so the doctrine of Divine Incarnation in Jesus, if we take its implications seriously, would not guarantee his intellectual infallibility. This he never claimed either for himself or for the form of any statement he made. He seems to have taken no pains to secure the handing down of his teaching in his own words. This attitude is consistent with his use of the Hebrew Scriptures; as an ultimate ground of belief in matters for which we have no other evidence, he never appealed to them. As Dr. Oman remarks, in an age largely dependent upon writing, among a people who esteemed the written word and with the idea of a sacred writing ever before his mind, he wrote nothing. Yet he spoke in high terms of the permanence of his teaching. Thus he deliberately took the risk that much might be lost and much misunderstood. Nevertheless, his method was justified, for to this day no word of his that remains is either easily forgotten or turned to commonplace.<sup>2</sup> But a claim to Divine authority for any-

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 180 f.

<sup>2</sup> John Oman, *Vision and Authority*, p. 127.

thing other than the great values of Jesus' revelation involves an assumption that his words were infallibly remembered, infallibly repeated for a number of years, and then infallibly translated and handed down in an uncorrupted text.

There are world-views or philosophies which are inconsistent with Jesus' revelation of the nature of God and man, and of the true motives and ideals of human conduct: in so far as they are irreconcilable with these values Christians will regard such philosophies to be false or inadequate; and that attitude will remain capable of intellectual defence. On the other hand, as we have seen, a theological dogma can have no ultimate meaning outside the world-view in which it is set.<sup>1</sup> It is the task of Christian theologians and teachers to think out the implications of Jesus' revelation and of the Christian way of life; but no attempts to make their formulations, how many soever or weighty they may be, and still less those of ecclesiastical assemblies, either absolute revelations of the truth or in form for ever thereafter unalterable, have any authority from Christ. Such decisions and formularies have no authority more divine than their conformity to the spirit of Christ and their own inherent reasonableness, which may include the necessity of preserving the values of the initial revelation. There is no body of theological statements for which we have Divine sanctions of approval. If the Church in past ages has thought otherwise, here is an instance

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 143 f., and below, p. 191 f.

in which frank confession of error is only less necessary than a new mind and a new spirit.

It remains to consider briefly the authority which is believed to attach to certain characteristics of the organization or certain rites of the Christian Society, which have been believed to have been instituted by Jesus. Such alleged 'Dominical institutions' are the Church itself, the Christian ministry and the two sacraments of the gospel. These are the most important, and what applies to them applies to any other such institutions for which the authority of Jesus may be claimed. The available relevant evidence has been sifted many times, and there is no need to set it out in detail again. Nothing new has been recently adduced on one side or the other of these now ancient controversies, nor is there any reason to hope for more decisive evidence than already exists.<sup>1</sup> The only recent change is that the modern type of New Testament criticism makes it more than ever manifest that certainty is impossible. The question 'Did Christ found the Church?' is answered, in the only sense ultimately relevant, by the fact that it is of the essence of Christian faith and life to diffuse themselves among men and to bind them together as fellow-members in the family of God.

It was as the fulfilment of the life and hopes of a

<sup>1</sup> The whole subject is discussed with reasonable fullness and, on the whole, with balanced judgment, in the Conference number of *The Modern Churchman* for 1926.

religious society that the disciples of Jesus recognized him as Messiah. It is truly said that the Church is inherent in the Messiahship. Let it be admitted (as I believe to be the fact) that the Eucharistic rite (which very likely rests on broader grounds in the ministry of Jesus than the Last Supper alone) was intended by Jesus to be celebrated in remembrance of him, of his passion and death: even so, we can hardly claim that the evidence is strong enough to exclude all reasonable doubt. I cannot see how any reasonable man can deny the fairness of the Bishop of Birmingham's<sup>1</sup> judgment that only a frail foundation exists for the elaborate superstructure of doctrine and of obligation which has been built upon it—that is, if we are considering the authority of Jesus for it. Similarly the probability is that Jesus approved baptism as a rite sealing repentance and securing admission to the family of his followers; but only an entirely pre-critical view of the New Testament can possibly support the view that he instituted the rite as one to be universally observed on pain of eternal loss.<sup>2</sup> Again, had Jesus explicitly contemplated a long future for his Church, and talked about it, his followers could hardly have supposed themselves to have his sanction for the eschatology which demonstrably they held. The history of the controversies,

<sup>1</sup> Dr. E. W. Barnes, F.R.S., Sc.D., in the volume cited in the preceding footnote.

<sup>2</sup> The attitude of the revisers of the Prayer Book in 1927–28 on these questions stands as a monument to the indifference of those ecclesiastical assemblies to modern New Testament studies.



clearly traceable in the New Testament, as to whether Gentiles were to be admitted into the Church and, if so, on what terms, shows conclusively that even on so fundamental an issue the early Church had no authoritative word of Jesus; at any rate they never appealed to any such word, which would have been decisive had they known of it. The only passages in the gospels which have direct and explicit reference to an ecclesiastical organization are found in the First Gospel, the one of the Synoptic gospels admittedly most coloured by the ideas, usages and traditions of the early Jewish-Christian Church in which it took shape: to account for their presence and attribution to Jesus we need assume no more than a very small exercise of the same mentality which could refer to Moses the legal system of late Judaism, late Psalms to David, and the Wisdom Literature to Solomon.

But even taking the relevant passages in the First Gospel as they stand, the significance traditionally attached to them depends on some assumptions which must seem to us unjustified. Most of such sayings, so far as we can know, were addressed to followers in general, exactly as was the context in which they now appear. There is not a word to suggest that authority was given exclusively to the Twelve with instructions to transmit it only to some believers; there is no direct word of Christ for any particular form of ministry or for an absolute authority of 'the Church' over branches thereof; still less is there the

smallest hint that a form of ministry once accepted by a majority, or even by all, was thereafter to be permanent. There is no promise of exclusive Divine guidance to a majority in the Church in matters of doctrine or organization, though it would appear that Jesus did give to the Christian Society a power of binding and loosing, that is, to pass judgment in matters of right and wrong. But even so, if such power is to be harmonized with the spirit of Christ's teaching, it must be interpreted as applying to the ideal of Society as he conceived it and must be approved by conscience rather than imposed by external authority. The position can be summed up with confidence in words used by Dr. Rawlinson in discussing an issue of this kind:

A close and critical examination of the New Testament documents is making it more and more difficult to conceive of the Master as having definitely and explicitly *legislated* upon this or any other matter, with regard to his future Church.

Nor may we assume that any rules or organizations which came to be widely or even universally accepted by the Church necessarily represent the will of God for all time, so as to make them incapable of modification or alteration.<sup>1</sup> That is more truly regarded as historical fatalism, which may easily deprive history and experience of all moral significance.

This position does not dispose of the problem of the relation of the individual animated by the spirit of

<sup>1</sup> See also pp. 196-198.

Christ to the Church as it has come to be;<sup>1</sup> but it does dispose of the claim that modern differences of opinion in regard to institutional religion and ecclesiastical organization can be settled by appeals to Divine authority or to the authority of the historical Jesus. Institutional and organizational doctrine formerly asserted dogmatically on a basis of history now seen to be historically very doubtful cannot be dogmatically asserted on some other basis. Every society must claim and exercise a right to organize itself in the manner best calculated to preserve and secure the actualization of its ideals; but that is not the same thing as to claim the authority of Jesus for particular forms of organization. Nor, in the modern world, is anyone, except those already convinced, likely to be influenced by majority votes of ecclesiastical office-holders whose exclusive right to decide such matters is precisely the question at issue. Wherever there is probability that a rite was practised or sanctioned by Jesus, no doubt the Christian will be content to act on the principle that "it is enough for the disciple that he be as his master". But he will hold, and do his utmost to induce the Church to hold, such doctrinal<sup>ol-</sup> about the significance of such rites as knowledge<sup>ch</sup> experience lead reason and conscience to approve<sup>vet</sup>. Questions about the institutions of Christianity should be decided upon the basis of a reasonable respect for historical continuity combined with the need for readaption to changing circumstances, and that

<sup>1</sup> On this subject see below, pp. 198 ff.

regard for the convictions and wishes of others which the spirit of Christianity enjoins upon us all.

The nature of the authority which the Church may legitimately claim and exercise will be discussed in the next lecture. For the individual, the abiding authority of Jesus consists in the fact, as to which experience leaves no doubt, that when his life and ideals are not only pondered intellectually but are set as the practical guide of human life, we ourselves become aware of new and transforming values in life and attain to a more worthy knowledge of God than this world elsewhere affords. Those who ask for more, though they may know it not, are really asking for less.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CHURCH: ITS AUTHORITY

THE WORD 'authority' may have either one of two meanings, or include them both. These are (a) *the right to require* assent, loyalty, obedience, and (b) *the power to enforce* these things. Historically the Church has claimed and attempted to exercise authority in both senses of the word; but the claim to authority in the sense of 'the power to enforce' (*imperium*) has now been practically abandoned.<sup>1</sup> Where this change has not been the result of a truer insight freely accepted, circumstances have compelled it. Any such *imperium* as any part of the Church might again conceivably claim, it would exercise only by permission of the State. No modern democratic State would grant it; while political dictators are necessarily jealous gods, not disposed to delegate *imperium* to any Church. Moreover, Churches and States alike can only enforce outward conformity, which may be dissimulation: they can never enforce the inner assent and loyalty of conscience with which

<sup>1</sup> Not by the Church of Rome, which has never officially repudiated its right to persecute in the interests of the human soul and of what it regards as religious truth.

religion is so deeply concerned. They may, perhaps, 'kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do', except face the condemnation of civilized mankind. Nevertheless, the nature of the Church's authority may be so conceived that, casuistical refinements notwithstanding, in practice it may come to mean the control of human spirits by other men, acting in the name of Heaven. To this conception of authority the right to exercise coercion lies so near at hand as to appear a logical consequence. Until all claims to such right are explicitly renounced by every section of the Church, mention of the fact that it has been made and exercised is not irrelevant in any consideration of the authority which properly belongs to the Church.

Authority, in the classical meaning of '*auctoritas*', does not necessarily signify *power to coerce* any forms of human activity. It means the right to guide and direct, grounded in the capacity to impart guidance and direction, and therefore the right to require assent, loyalty and obedience thereto; and it has been and will be generally implied that the guidance in religious faith and morals which authority can mediate is such that men would not otherwise discern it with equal clarity, if indeed at all. It is this meaning of the word which alone is here intended in speaking of the Church's authority; and it is obvious that in this sense authority in religion is akin to the various kinds of authority on which we must needs and do rely day by day in the conduct of civilized life. We do

not in fact discover, each for himself, the accumulated wisdom of the human race: most of it with which we are acquainted we accept on authority and never personally verify more than a small part of it, while even the part of it we do verify originally comes to us upon authority. It is only when we stand on the shoulders of past generations that we are at all likely to see further or more clearly than they did.

Equally obvious is the authoritative character of the great religions: they claim for what they teach the authority of truth. No religious person, whatever his attitude to particular religious beliefs, regards his religion as a whole as an immature reaction to life which increasing experience will enable him to out-grow, or as based upon speculations which, equally with others, may turn out to be groundless. On the contrary, the oft-renewed strength of irrational reliance upon various forms of religious authority is largely due to the fear of the effects of eliminating authority, the fear that it is a necessary and the only efficient bulwark of the truth against a chaos of individualism such as would lead to complete indifference to the religion of others, which is intolerable because it implies indifference to truth.

The authority of the Christian Church, whatever the forms of the statements of it or the means of its exercise, has consistently claimed the same fundamental justification. This could hardly be set forth more simply and more adequately than in three

statements from the opening Resolutions of the last Lambeth Conference<sup>1</sup> composed of all Bishops of the Anglican Communion throughout the world, and which would be accepted by the overwhelming majority of other Christians of whatever ecclesiastical allegiance:

1. 'We believe that the Christian Church is the repository and trustee of a revelation of God, given by Himself, which all members of the Church are bound to transmit to others.'
2. 'As Jesus Christ is the crown, so also He is the criterion of all revelation.'
3. 'We believe that the work of our Lord Jesus Christ is continued by the Holy Spirit.'<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the basis and the justification of the Church's authority, on the ground of which it claims the right to require the assent and loyalty of mankind, is the possession of a more adequate knowledge of God than is now elsewhere to be found; and further, that this knowledge is a trust committed to its keeping by the self-revelation of God, and that it is progressive knowledge of truth.

An obvious challenge to this claim is the existence of other great religions, some of them making similar claims. The modern comparative study of religions seems to intensify the challenge. Part of the difficulty of defining religion, so as not to include what is not essential to it nor to leave out what is widely charac-

<sup>1</sup> That of 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Report, p. 39.



teristic of it, is that religion permeates and influences such varied activities of life that it can hardly be isolated from them. But, as we noted in a previous lecture, the human needs and attitudes which religion always awakens and satisfies are characteristically uniform.<sup>1</sup> It follows that it is impossible to claim that the experiences, insights, and spiritual life within Christianity are real and to declare them illusions when manifested elsewhere. If we reject the notion that all the phenomena of religion are the result of a grand illusion, we are at once compelled to acknowledge some measure of real knowledge of God and of true spiritual life in religion generally, and a great deal in the higher religions. Only those for whom impartial consideration of evidence is inhibited by the groundless certainty of predetermined conclusions can possibly believe that there is one religion infallibly true and several others wholly false. The Christian Church need make no such absurd claim. God has not left Himself without witness in any age or place: His everlasting power and divinity are manifested to mankind in varying degrees through the created universe and through the lives and work of those who in such diverse ways sincerely seek Him. But when Christianity is thus set among other religions as a historical phenomenon, a problem is presented to which the easy solution is that all religions are relatively true, and that different peoples have the religions best adapted to their natures and needs, but

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 76.

that nothing much more can be claimed for any one of them. This conclusion leaves nothing possessing finality to which various religions are relative, and it is apt to inhibit those decisions of faith without which there can be little progress in religious life, and to issue in that practical scepticism which may be more debilitating than theoretical denial.

The issue is fundamental; but its subject-matter is so vast that it is not surprising that there have been few thorough attempts to grapple with it. That of the late Ernst Troeltsch is the best so far made and the results of his investigation will illustrate our theme. His conclusion was that the comparative study of religions does not merely reveal such a jumbled mass of ideas and values that reliable judgment between them is impossible. On the contrary, the number of men who have had anything genuinely new to say and the fundamental thoughts by which men live are alike few. The cults of primitive and uncivilized peoples, multiform in appearance but monotonous in content, may be disregarded; the higher forms of polytheism are nationally or geographically restricted in influence. There are, in fact, very few great constructions of ethical and spiritual religion. 'In the last resort it is a question of the struggle between at most three or four leading revelations of the higher religious life, and between the corresponding forms of spiritual culture.'

The great religions, other than Christianity, fall into two classes. Judaism and Islam are religions of

law: they give few signs of ability to transcend limitations of race. Whatever the actual rivalry in certain localities, neither is a serious rival to Christianity in the claim to universality. Hinduism and Buddhism are religions of Redemption: salvation is by enlightenment which must be attained by individual effort. The former is fatally handicapped by bondage to a caste system, while the highest forms of Buddhism lead inevitably to monasticism which clearly cannot be universal; and both are corrupted by polytheism and superstition to an extent unknown in any form of Christianity. Again, Islam so emphasizes the power and majesty of God as to set Him above all moral distinctions and to make it difficult to ascribe to Him the attributes of holiness and love, a fact which must and does profoundly influence the religious life; while Buddhism, though originally lacking the idea of God, has been led to the virtual deification of men, a tendency wholly at variance with every aspect of modern knowledge and thought. Possibly, as others have thought, Troeltsch overemphasized the contrast between the religions of law and those of redemption: doubtless elements of both are to be found in each. 'We should rather speak of two tendencies found in imperfect unity in all these religions.'<sup>1</sup> But this point does not affect the one now before us.

Troeltsch's conclusion is that Christianity offers the

<sup>1</sup> Sydney Cave, in *The Future of Christianity*, edited by Sir J. Archant, p. 16.

fullest and most complete revelation of personal religious life: it interprets spiritual reality in terms of personal life. For Christianity, God is living and active: He brings human persons into personal fellowship with Himself. The needs of the legal and redemptive religions are both combined and satisfied. Christianity thus represents the climax and goal of convergence of the tendencies of religious development in the great historical religions.

Troeltsch, however, did not exclude the possibility of another revelation transcending that embedded in Christianity. He held that Christianity is the only possible religion *for us*; but the obvious fact that, in entirely different cultural conditions, other races may experience contact with the Divine life in very different ways, he regarded as a state of affairs which would be permanent, and he ceased to hope either that the other great religions would disappear by the conversion of their adherents to Christianity, or that these religions would undergo transformation into something recognizable as Christianity: the only legitimate and reasonable hope was for greater mutual understanding. Troeltsch insisted that this in no way reduced the obligation to share our religious insights with others, and he regarded acquiescence in an unlimited relativity as a degeneration of toleration and as a modern disease afflicting faith. But it is impossible to ignore the magnitude of the reduction of the historic claim of Christianity involved in his final conclusion, or the severe limitations which its

acceptance would impose on the authority of the Christian Church, that is, upon its right to require the assent, loyalty and obedience of mankind.

But this great issue cannot be decided only by the comparative study of religions. That study cannot itself prove even that Christianity is superior to other religions, which Troeltsch acknowledged; still less can it pronounce upon its historic claim to finality. Judgments of truth and value are not derived from historical studies alone, nor can they be confined in historico-critical categories. Nor is the truth or finality of any beliefs to be established merely by finding out how many people share them, and under what forms and conditions. If the Christian revelation of God be true it is, of course, no matter for surprise if the scientific comparison of Christianity with other religions should provide evidence for the judgment that it represents the goal of tendencies disclosed in them. But belief in the supreme value of the Christian religion has never rested upon any irrefutable demonstration of the inferiority of other religions.

Ultimate postulates are never matters of historical or of logical proof, whether in religion or in any other human activities. The conviction of an unique manifestation or incarnation of God can only be established by a process of religious experience and thought in which faith is present and active from the first. If the incarnation of God in a historical person be true and the medium of the fullest revelation of God that man

can assimilate, it can never be appreciated or accepted by one who regards all personality as a grievous and evanescent limitation and all human history as belonging to a realm of illusion, so long as he holds those opinions. If the essential purpose and significance of any revelation is to open the spiritual eyes of men to realities which they may recognize but do not create or invent, then the values of that revelation and the question of its truth or finality cannot possibly be adequately judged by those who do not receive and sincerely respond to its illumination.

It has been and is the claim of the Christian Church to possess data for which a place must be found in any world-view which aspires to truth, and further that, if these data are admitted, they will necessarily determine the ultimate valuation of all else; while it is not a serious matter for Christians if these data will not fit into any world-view formed by leaving them out. That is the basis of the authority of the Christian Church.

From the beginning Christianity has been proclaimed with authority, preached as good news. Beyond doubt Jesus himself lived, acted and taught 'as one having authority'. He did not put forth his teaching as speculative opinions critically deduced from doubtful premisses, supported by the balancing of opposites with dialectical skill. 'Verily, verily' is the note of it all. In this respect, as in others, he both stands within and goes beyond the Israelite prophetic succession: 'Thus saith the Lord' becomes 'I say unto

you.' The early Christian Church, born of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, believed itself to be the climax of a purpose of God which had been continuously directed by Him at least from the time of Abraham onwards; and throughout its history the Church has held its message to embody God's revelation to man and God's call to man. It has never conceived itself and its message as *only* one part or aspect of a general movement of man's spirit in his reaching out for God, which it satisfies. Whenever its message authenticates itself with power in the hearts of men it is not as something self-achieved or self-invented, but as an authoritative gospel. Its value and truth can be vindicated by experience and subsequent thought, but that involves putting it to the test in all sincerity. It claims finality because its revelation of the love of God is true. It leads to fuller illumination as it is integrated (as it must be) with the increasing knowledge and experience of mankind; but it claims that human progress in the apprehension of its meaning is not possible except in the light which the revelation itself supplies, all such progress being indeed part of it and belonging to it, not something different. Its finality is *finality of direction*, not finality of formulated statement or of human understanding.

We have seen that Divine revelation consists in events or occasions in the world of history and human life *and* in the human recognition of the significance

of such events for what it truly is. Neither the outward events nor the human recognition is without Divine guidance, nor does Revelation consist wholly in the one or in the other but in their conjunction. There cannot therefore be any clear-cut division between such special revelations and that afforded by the whole creative process, in which the Divine activity may be recognized, and which is a self-expression of the nature and will of God.<sup>1</sup> The revelation of God of which man can best appreciate the significance is that given in human personality which represents a culmination of the creative process hitherto; and Christians recognize this fullest revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. It follows that the nature of the Church's authority is determined by the revelation whence it is derived: it cannot be conceived or exercised inconsistently with that revelation without ceasing to be Christian. The justification of the authority of the Church must be simply the nature of that authority. Fundamental in the Christian religion, inseparable from it because an implication of ethical Theism, is the supreme value of human personality in the sight of God; not, indeed, on account of anything which persons may claim of God in their own right, but because they bear His image and because, for that reason, personality was the vehicle for the supreme revelation of God in history and its salvation the purpose of that revelation. The dignity of God-given moral personality is a no less important truth of

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 113-115.



Christianity than the self-revealing nature of God<sup>1</sup>; for which reason any attempts to revive a conception of revelation and consequent religious authority which are inconsistent with the sacredness of ethical personality are efforts to reinstate the obsolete, and can only result in inadequately moralized religion. Höffding stated the Christian ideal in the words: 'The principle of authority is subordinate to the principle of personality.'<sup>2</sup> The Church's authority is a means, not an end.

It is on this ground that all claims to inerrant or infallible authority must be rejected as irreconcilable with the most important values of Christianity, no less than because the evidence of history and experience shows infallibility to be non-existent. Claims to possess and exercise it are also destructive of all hope of the universal recognition of true Christian authority. The only way to give plausibility to claims to inerrant religious authority is to set out from *a priori* ideas of how it befits God to act in His dealings with men. By that method, it can, of course, be argued that if God is omnipotent His omnipotent acts will be guided by His omniscience, and in consequence any Divine revelation must be infallible; and as He will

<sup>1</sup> On this and other points in what follows, see Dr. Oman's *Grace and Personality* and Dr. Tennant's *Philosophical Theology*, vol. ii, chapter viii. The positions there maintained are fundamental to any modern treatment of the allied subjects of revelation, grace, and authority. Any exposition of these doctrines which ignores such principles or evades them is worthless in as far as it does so.

<sup>2</sup> *The Philosophy of Religion* (translated by B. E. Meyer), p. 279.

desire its preservation from error, He will assuredly provide that it shall be so preserved. But such conceptions can never be reached by considering God's *actual* dealings with men and they create difficulties more unanswerable than any they remove. If God can ever rightly deal with persons in that way the extreme economy with which He does so becomes a mystery alike inexplicable and superfluous. If He can rightly control some human spirits, keeping them in the way of inerrant knowledge of truth, why not so control all human persons and so remove needless limitations? Why use throughout the ages methods of which boundless error and failure are the inevitable yet superfluous consequences? As Dr. Oman observes, if the obedience of mere submission to infallible disclosures will satisfy the heart of God, then the methods He has actually employed with man are chiefly distinguished by the chaos they have permitted.<sup>1</sup>

Any view of Church authority as infallible leaves the whole method of human experience and our acquirement of knowledge, including man's apprehension of progressive revelation, without explanation or justification. If God could ever *rightly* act towards persons so as to override their personal limitations by His power, or in any other way than by enabling them to get their own insights, then our weaknesses, ignorances and sins are the easiest of all things for God to remove and the most senseless ever to permit.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Vision and Authority*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Grace and Personality*, p. 153.

Such a conception of God's mode of dealing with men is irreconcilable with the fundamental conception of Him as the Father of spirits made in His image, with whom He deals as with sons. That any such idea of God's dealings with us can be held without destroying all worthy conceptions of God's Personality and of our own is due to evading or overlooking its implications. Irresistible force, overwhelming persons as though they were things, even though it be represented as God's condescension to aid our weakness, is not personal or spiritual action at all, nor does it belong to the sphere of personal relationships.

The long story of human advance in the knowledge of God nowhere suggests Divine revelation imparted by omniscient omnipotence, such as alleged infallible revelations and authorities imply. The slow progress of the ages is overwhelming testimony to the fact, no less evident from present experience, that God does not so deal with man. It is equally clear that evolution has been towards greater responsibility for our beliefs and actions. The Reformation, itself an effect the causes of which extend much further back, was a great if imperfect movement towards individual responsibility; and the revolt against infallibilities has since increased in strength wherever men have been free. Infallibilist authority in any form, discredited alike by reason and by historical evidence, cannot now roll back historical progress by mere assertion and by demonstrations of how useful it would be if men

would but consent to heed its claims.<sup>1</sup> To use Dr. Oman's illustration, the dam of inerrant authority has burst; there have been attempts to rebuild it, and there may be more; and they may appear impressive and encourage hope so long as attention is confined to the dam and the flood is ignored.

It is precisely where infallibilist authority has exercised the greatest influence that its rejection has been most violent whenever education and new ideas beget freedom; nor is the significance of this fact decreased if the first movement of new freedom is often from the frying-pan into the fire. Inerrant authority can only maintain itself by tortuous treatment of facts and by fettering the human mind; and the result is to set up an irresolvable conflict between the equally essential requirements of complete religious dependence upon God and complete moral freedom. These requirements of religious dependence and moral independence can only be reconciled if revelation and consequent authority are of such a nature as to enable men to get their own insights. If the primary purpose of religious truth is the promotion of a spiritual and personal relationship between God and man, it cannot be conveyed by omnipotent deliverance: human reception and understanding are necessarily involved in its imparting. We can receive it only as refracted through the human medium with all its imperfections

<sup>1</sup> As Dr. Oman writes in *Vision and Authority*, 'The religion which is maintained, not because it is true, but because, for the mass of men, it is necessary, is already forsaken.' (Page 22.)

and ignorances. If an isolated piece of infallible information could be given by God, it would inevitably be received and its significance interpreted within the terms of the particular and partial world-view of one generation: its rediscovery by succeeding generations would be an insoluble problem. Only infallible interpreters could solve the problem, and their existence would involve continual impersonal overriding of human conditions inconsistent with ethical Theism and moral personality.

The actual history of Christianity's progress equally affords no grounds for belief in inerrant revelation as the basis of the Church's authority. Admittedly Jesus was no less truly human than Divine. This not only involves liability to error,<sup>1</sup> but also the necessity of living and speaking in the context of a particular historical setting of ideas. Indeed, were it otherwise, confession of the real humanity of Jesus would be little more than verbal. Jesus infallibly preserved from error would be modern Docetism—the Divine appearing as man, but not becoming man and living a human life,—a very early and since persistent heresy. The revelation of God in Jesus, though faith may confess that in him dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was transmitted through the very real limitations of its first recipients, who were certainly not preserved from manifest errors; in its

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 155 ff. *Actuality* of error in Jesus need not be discussed. It is sufficient to insist that there can be no infallible human judgment that he was not liable to err, or that he did not do so.

adaptation to the understanding of other peoples, by which it became capable of universal significance, it intermingled with much else of transient value; its further theological development and definition brought in other temporary elements; while the acceptance of definitions does not preclude differences of interpretation, and they are often accepted from other motives as well as the disinterested love of truth, even if the disinterested love of truth guaranteed its attainment, which manifestly it does not.<sup>1</sup>

The Church's authority must be so conceived and exercised as to be compatible with the clear recognition that the Church is not inerrant either in faith or in morals. This, perhaps, is platitudinous, but is far from realization in practice. No phenomenon is more obvious and more strange in certain Church circles to-day than the combination of ecclesiastical confidence with theological uncertainty. Yet the Church may have real authority even if it be not inerrant. It is recognized that in the last resort an individual must follow his conscience, but no instructed person supposes conscience to be infallible. No reasonable person doubts that the expert in any subject speaks with authority in that subject and that he can give guidance therein which less expert persons are foolish to ignore; but again no reasonable person thinks the expert is inerrant or is much perturbed if he is proved

<sup>1</sup> These points, and others, are excellently treated in the chapter on Authority in the first volume of Professor A. E. Taylor's *The Faith of a Moralist*.

erroneous, as he may well be by his own further study and experience.

Once more, science and an ever-growing body of scientific knowledge maintain and increase their prestige, and have greater actual authority among us than has any Church, notwithstanding the changing deliverances of scientific men and their open confessions of imperfect knowledge and ignorance. Similarly there is no valid reason why the Church should not exercise her authority as the right to require assent and loyalty, provided a clear distinction is drawn and maintained between authority *as a means of coming to know what the truth is* and authority *as the basis of truth*. The former is legitimate, indeed essential: the latter is a false and useless notion. The expert is trusted, not because he claims his own authority as the ultimate basis of what he teaches, but because people have confidence that what he teaches could be verified by any other person with the same qualifications in the same circumstances; whereas when authority claims to be the *basis of truth*, the idea of appeal to anything more ultimate than the authority itself is precluded. The ways of coming to know ought always to be distinguished from the ways of deciding whether what we come to know is true or false.<sup>1</sup>

Authority always needs certification. That is why the infallibility of Church or Pope cannot logically survive the disproof of the inerrancy of Scripture, and is why the Roman Church officially maintains a

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 70-72.

Fundamentalism as thoroughgoing as that of Tennessee. The type of modern apologetic favoured in some ecclesiastical circles, which affects to treat radical New Testament criticism as unimportant, because we still have the living voice of the Church which gave us the New Testament, is compounded of novelty and futility. That the Church decided what books should be included in the New Testament, as Archdeacon Lilley points out in his admirable little book on *Religion and Revelation*, is historically true, but theologically is entirely beside the point. The Church *recognized* the inspiration of certain writings and accepted them as of Divine origin, but did not claim to be the *source* of that inspiration and authority. The Church's function was that of 'a witness and keeper of Holy Writ', and its power of interpretation was limited to preserving the true meaning of Holy Writ: no power to decree anything contrary thereto was claimed. It is impossible to maintain the validity in practice of the external authority which has been removed from thought or from the Bible. For the Church cannot guarantee the inerrancy either of itself or of what it teaches unless it can produce credentials that it is itself Divinely guaranteed from the possibility of error; and that is not possible. The promise of the Spirit of Truth to guide Christians into all truth cannot without absurdity be interpreted to mean that Jesus would give in a roundabout way the kind of inerrant guidance which he himself so plainly refused to give.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> St. John xiv. 26. xvi. 13-15. and see above. pp. 147-149.



If revelation consists in real events in history and life *and* in human apprehension of their significance, it is obvious that authority and experience are alike implied in the occurrence of revelation. For there is an already established religious tradition and other knowledge to which the new revelation has to be related, and in terms of which it will tend to be interpreted. But it will sometimes happen that the new cannot be adequately interpreted in that way. Then there will arise a tension or a conflict between tradition (i.e. authority) and experience. Moreover, other experience and knowledge, besides accepted religious tradition, bear potently on life and thought, and to minds sensitive to these authority may easily appear as an obstacle to the attainment of fuller truth.<sup>1</sup> We all tend to accept an authoritative tradition, provided it be sufficiently widely accepted, unless new and apparently inconsistent elements in experience make us dissatisfied with it. So long as in accepting tradition we can believe ourselves to be responding to the call and claims of truth, we feel ourselves to be truly free. The devout Roman Catholic, so long as he is sincerely convinced that in the claims of his Church are embodied God's will and truth for man, is entirely unconscious of mental and spiritual bondage. To the Christian, the round of ritual observances of Judaism appears to have fettered the soul

<sup>1</sup> Even so it does not mean that such minds are dispensing with authority: it generally means that they are recognizing it elsewhere than, or as well as, in accepted tradition.

and religion alike in chains of their own forging; but so long as the devout Jew sincerely believes these observances to represent the will of an all-wise, all-holy and all-loving God, they are not felt to be either petty or a chain. It is only when other experience or knowledge leads men to doubt whether these ritual rules or those authoritarian claims do in fact adequately represent the Divine will and truth for man that they come to be felt as an intolerable bondage if there is no immediate escape from their service. It is always the call to what is felt to be truth which arouses the desire for freedom and creates the sense of bondage when response to truth is hindered.

Thus, though religious experience is always mediated and conditioned by tradition possessing authority, it is also true that experience itself leads to modification of tradition. Dr. Temple very truly writes:

Individuals, who are specially responsive to those elements in the tradition which are qualified for permanence, receive through their religious experience so vivid an apprehension of the aspects of the truth which these express, that these elements assume an altogether new proportion; the perspective and emphasis of the tradition is thereby changed, and sometimes, under the influence of that change, elements which had at one time been accepted with a reverence equal to that paid to any part of the tradition, sink into recognized unimportance and finally drop out altogether.<sup>1</sup>

And he proceeds to illustrate the operation of the

<sup>1</sup> *Nature, Man and God*, p. 338.

same principle in the opposite direction by a brief history of the famous precept 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. This first appears in an Old Testament context which shows that it was certainly not recognized as the root principle of all morality. It was but one precept among many others, and the word 'neighbour' had no wider meaning than 'fellow-Israelite'. The subsequent transforming significance of this precept only became possible, first when it was rescued from relative obscurity and placed side by side with the command to love God with all the being, already recognized as the first and great commandment, and when Jesus interpreted 'neighbour' as meaning any fellow-man, even a member of a hostile and despised nation.

The same process can be seen in the history of Old Testament prophecy. Each prophet speaks as if he were declaring what came to him as a direct Divine message, yet the indebtedness of the prophets to the teaching of their predecessors is obvious to anyone who will but take trouble to compare the cross-references given in any modern Bible. What came to them as new revelation came in their sincere dealing with contemporary historical events and with the actual needs of their own day, in the light of such knowledge as they had already acquired. The whole message of the prophet arose from his communion with God which endowed it, for the prophet, with something more than human authority, even though it was sometimes inconsistent with what had come by

the same means to his predecessors. The same is supremely true of Jesus of Nazareth and in the significance which his Spirit enabled his disciples to recognize in his coming and in his work. But in none of these instances, or in any others, for reasons already given,<sup>1</sup> have we to do with Divinely dictated and infallible oracles. So to regard these truths of revelation as to make their historic forms final and irreformable for all subsequent ages and all peoples, denies the true and living revelation in which they were grounded.<sup>2</sup> We then turn the temporal into the eternal, and at a later stage it takes an ironical revenge by leading us to approve what we ought to set aside or to set aside what we ought to approve. Perhaps the greatest value of our sacred Scriptures is, as Canon Lilley points out, that they afford a perfect example of the progressive education of a single people by the Divine Spirit, a people which was so responsive to the teaching of the Spirit that it was always passing judgment upon itself if for a time it failed to respond to the fuller truth into which it was being divinely led.

As Christianity is a historical religion, deriving its distinctive features from the life and teaching of a historic person, the individual must needs acquire his

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 174 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Because what is of permanent authority in them cannot be expressed in formulae: "it is the living apprehension of the Divine in living intercourse of the human spirit with the Divine." Temple, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

first knowledge of it from authority, whether the authority be that of a modern teacher or of a written record; and as Christian faith and life have from the first been embodied in and transmitted by a society, it comes to all of us as essentially a social product. It is received by us, yet it is always a living, growing thing. As at the first, so much more now, it embodies a rich and varied experience embracing far more than the individual, with his special aptitudes and limitations, can extract out of it. Moreover, every society that is to survive must retain its inalienable right to safeguard the foundations of its own life and existence; and it is eminently reasonable to claim that nineteen centuries of Christianity have accumulated truths, insights and values which must be safeguarded, and are too precious to be lightly risked or abandoned. Viewed in this way, the kind of authority of the Christian tradition embodied in the Christian Society is not essentially different from that of other tested knowledge and experience. Even our confident belief in an ordered objective world outside us is a social product, verified in experience; while reason and conscience are not merely private faculties and possessions: we can trust them as we do because they are the embodiment of what is much more than merely individual.

There is then no necessary or final opposition between the authority of the Christian Society and the claims of sound learning and of individual insight. Authority may be the means of attainment to the

true freedom of truth in contrast to the licence of error. But it is not possible to be a living member of a living society existing for a specific purpose and at the same time to do exactly as you like. Frequent tension between authority on the one hand and experience, individual inspiration, insight and learning on the other hand, is inevitable in the world as it is if there is to be any progress at all. For not all that claims to be sound learning is so, nor are all claimants to individual inspiration either good or wise, nor is experience always free from illusion and error. But though tension is inevitable, it should be temporary if the true nature, function and justification of authority are perceived. The first necessity is to put away the illusion that authority is inerrant, and the further illusion that, because it is not inerrant, authority is untrustworthy. Whatever the 'given' elements, whether in ordinary experience or in a religious revelation, they can never be wholly isolated from other human elements involved in their reception and assimilation. Nor can there be any rigid or absolute distinction or cleavage between the revelation of God in Christ, of which the Church is the trustee, and any other knowledge of God which may be attained by individual insight or from study of God's world: the human receptivity of the one, no less than the human activities in the others, involve imperfection and the possibility of error.

It is because God cannot give faith in and knowledge of Himself *to persons*, otherwise than by personal con-

viction involving human receptivity and mediation, that any form of mediation, whether of Christ or of the authority of the Church, is necessary. Were it otherwise, all forms of mediation would be alike superfluous and gratuitous sources of misunderstanding. As Dr. Oman says, for God to aid man were easy, but to aid him so as not to destroy his freedom but to perfect it, is a task requiring the manifold wisdom of God.<sup>1</sup> Provided only that he is facing in the right direction, to every man God offers Himself not from His heavenly throne, but in Christ amid the struggle of human life. If the essence of the Christian revelation is the restoration and promotion of personal relations of sons to their Divine Father, the main purpose of God's self-revelation, and therefore of the authority of the Church which derives therefrom, is not to fill gaps in intellectual knowledge or to explain mysteries for us, but to open our eyes to read and understand God's manifestation of Himself everywhere. The act of faith is made possible both by a Divine gift *and* by our own insight. We put asunder what God has joined together if we regard it as wholly the one or wholly the other.

It would be inconceivable that God should directly implant ideas in human minds which are destined to be found ethically or otherwise defective by man; and that is what has happened to not a little for which the authority of final Divine revelation has been claimed.

<sup>1</sup> *Vision and Authority*, p. 115.

The insistence, frequent enough in these days, that Christianity is not concerned to prescribe scientific and historical conclusions, would be more impressive had it been made before scientific and historical propositions which the Church had clothed with the authority of Divine revelation had been shown to be erroneous. There can be no doubt that in religious as in all other knowledge, human progress has proceeded through what, from the standpoint of later advance, is to be described as error; and there is no reason whatever to suppose it will be otherwise in the future.

Unless it be irreverently contended that man can wrest the knowledge of God from Him against His will, all true knowledge of God involves His self-revelation. But it is no longer possible to distinguish revelation from 'natural knowledge' by its *modus operandi*. Nor can any idea be known to be true as it were in a vacuum: its meaning and its very existence as a clear idea are determined by a system of ideas. A doctrine defines a fact as it appears within a certain sphere of thought, but, as Dr. Whitehead says:

You cannot claim absolute finality for a dogma without claiming a commensurate finality for the sphere of thought in which it arose.<sup>1</sup>

Dogmas may be adequate in their adjustment of certain conceptions, 'but the estimate of the status of those concepts remains for determination'. There is no knowledge which can prove, or render it likely,

<sup>1</sup> *Religion in the Making*, p. 130.



that religion is not evoked by the action of an invisible Reality upon human souls; and certainly the knowledge most valued by religious men was not in fact achieved by any conscious process of abstract ratiocination. But religious experience is always clothed in forms supplied by other human knowledge and experience of the world. Intense experience precedes elaborate theological formulation; but there is no *bare* experience which comes first, apart from all ideas already entertained. Religious experience and theology, or ideology, are always interrelated, however rudimentary the theology may be, or however little the person experiencing may be aware of it or attend to it. The two always go together: religious experience can never be isolated from theology or from ideas, as though it were an *independent* source of knowledge.

These considerations must determine the right relations of the Church's authority to sound learning. The authority of the past cannot be invoked to settle problems which increased knowledge is always liable to present. Even universal agreement existing in the past upon matters which were not then identical with the problems they have since become, or which were then seen in a very different setting, can as well betoken universal error as universal truth.<sup>1</sup> The greatest danger to the authority which properly belongs to the Church is the growth of a mentality

<sup>1</sup> It is this fact which makes it so difficult to attach to the agreement of 'the undivided Church' the overwhelming weight assigned to it in the otherwise admirable treatment of Authority by Dr. N. P. Williams in *Northern Catholicism*.

which thinks that modern questionings can be silenced by the search for and the application of past authoritative precedents. This mentality is a progressive disease, for it inevitably regards the inability to share it as a further revolt against authority and as additional evidence of the need of it. It is equally unnecessary and disastrous to argue as though new ideas which conflict with old doctrines, if admitted, mean that there was no Divine guidance of the Church in the past, or as it is sometimes put, that the Holy Spirit led the Church astray. For, whatever may be 'given' to men, what they can appreciate and understand is always determined by their insight, their goodness and their knowledge.

Thus the question is not whether the Divine guidance has enabled the Church to anticipate and settle modern problems in advance, but only whether, in the light of knowledge available and reasonably to have been accepted at the time, the Church took and maintained the wholly wrong line. If we can judge that in a given context the Church on the whole and in all the existing circumstances acted for the best in preserving the values of the revelation with which it is entrusted, the fact that the identical decision then taken would not now be the best, or even that it would now be wrong, is no proof of the absence of Divine guidance in the past. Inasmuch as the abiding source of the Christian revelation is a Person, whose work is continued by his Spirit, there can be a 'perpetually fresh response to the unchanging Lord in

ever-changing conditions'.<sup>1</sup> New circumstances with no counterparts in the first age of Christianity, or in past ages of the Church's life, demand new decisions. The Church's authority in the modern world will only be real and weighty in so far as it represents a consensus of judgment which is really free. The agreement of vast multitudes of Christians is of very little weight so long as they are forbidden, on pain of eternal loss, to entertain even interior doubt of any elements in a defined body of dogma.

Though the various attempts to establish external religious authority of an inerrant kind have all failed, societies have a right to protect the springs of their life, and certain people may be specially charged with that responsibility. They may thus legitimately exercise authority; but sooner or later they must come to terms with established knowledge, otherwise they will be using the very truth they guard to encourage falsehood. As in the past, so no doubt in the future, the vast majority of religious people will accept the tradition widely prevailing in the religious society in which their religious life is nourished by worship and teaching. Thus it will often be the part of individuals and small groups to rouse authority from indifference and to open its eyes. Though the prevailing tradition preserves an innumerable host of individual insights, it has in fact frequently been modified by new ones which it owes to individuals,

<sup>1</sup> W. Temple, *Thoughts on Some Problems of the Day*, p. 31.

and over-confident rejection of further new ones may involve Church authority in fighting against God.

The only human spiritual life not wholly unworthy of the God whom Christians worship, or indeed which is worthy of man himself, is that which is built upon and nourished by truth, in the fullest measure in which truth is available. Moreover, it is only truly *spiritual* authority which can in the last resort convince. Not only the gates of Hades but other less formidable forces are constantly prevailing against other kinds of authority exercised in the name of spiritual religion. Authority is not necessarily spiritual because it is exercised by religious persons, or by some ecclesiastical order of persons, in the interests of religion: spirituality of authority can only reside in the nature of such authority itself, and cannot be conferred upon any other type of authority by whomsoever exercised. This truth is admirably put by Dr. Temple thus:

Where conformity of conduct, or even of opinion, is secured by other means than that of persuading the person affected that such conduct is good, or such opinion is right, the authority exercised is less than fully spiritual.<sup>1</sup>

If actual circumstances and the imperfections and wilfulness of human nature produce occasional situations in which the Church must needs exercise an authority less than fully spiritual, it will best exercise such discipline by excluding none from sharing its

<sup>1</sup> *Nature, Man and God*, p. 345.

life and worship except in cases where practice is a scandalous denial of profession. The Church must face the fact that as education—still more as half-education—increases and spreads over widening circles, it will become less probable that people will think exactly alike on those ultimate questions which do not admit of any theoretical answer which is not partly speculative, or on many points of historic Christian doctrine.

Truth, no doubt, is many sided; individuals can only possess it in part. Where there is genuine desire for truth, a consequent teachableness, the humility to believe oneself mistaken and a due regard for the feelings of others, the present inevitable differences ought not to weaken our fellowship one with another in the Church, nor make common worship impossible. On the other hand, to allow ourselves to become indifferent to the ideal of a growing unity and to the possibility and duty of realizing it, is the worst failure. Such growing unity would do much, in some respects more than aught else, to convince the world. To become satisfied with our separations is practical denial of faith that God and Truth are one. Our present duty is to hold fast to what we honestly believe to be true, and to serve in the Church which we believe to represent what is most in accord with the Divine will for man.

Nevertheless, after much hesitation and frequent oscillation between conflicting attitudes, and not without recognition of what may be said on the other

side, I have reached the settled conviction that to make anything like complete dogmatic unity the essential condition precedent to intercommunion and sharing in common worship is alike false in principle and sterile as the method of attaining unity. For two reasons—which in my judgment outweigh all others. First because, though I would not minimize the importance of the issues which divide Christian Churches, and in spite of the obligation to be loyal to the truth as we see it, many of these matters do not seem to me to admit of such certainty of opinion that we can so much as mention them in the presence of God or at the foot of the Cross as justification of refusal to worship with any who desire or care to approach the throne of grace with us or who may desire that we approach it with them: I have no confidence that the reasons usually alleged would meet with Divine approval. Secondly, I believe that fellowship in common worship can alone mediate that spirit which is an indispensable condition in the fuller apprehension of truth and of seeing existing differences in true proportion. If such Christian fellowship can be attained and intensified, with freedom also secured, we may humbly rely on the Divine Spirit of Truth to enable us to achieve a larger and growing measure of that genuinely free consensus in matters of belief which all Christians must needs desire and which would have immense authority in the world. Synthesis will take time. Long-standing divisions and differences of emphasis in belief have led to corre-

sponding differences of supporting religious experience. In the circumstances of the modern world synthesis will probably never be complete because change will continually be necessary, nor are easily made syntheses likely to endure.

The Church cannot regard right belief as of little importance. The dominant tradition will be accepted uncritically by multitudes and will largely determine their religious experience. At any stage the Church may reasonably say that new ideas and novel doctrines are not yet established as true and ought not to be so presented, more particularly to uncritical persons, by those who teach in the name of the Church; but the ominous and abundantly illustrated truth in Professor A. E. Taylor's words must never be forgotten:

If one age, from the worthiest motives, persists in defending the indefensible, the next is likely to see a panic surrender of the indispensable.<sup>1</sup>

The degree of submission which the Church may reasonably ask will vary and depend on circumstances; and in the last resort, for the individual there is no escape from the principle that he must follow his own insight and conscience, and accept the consequences. Wise authority will try to avoid creating or intensifying tension between itself and the consciences of good and able men; and in the modern world authority will gain in impressiveness only as it becomes more truly spiritual, that is, the more un-

<sup>1</sup> *The Faith of a Moralist*, vol. i, p. 227.

reservedly it commits its authoritative message to the test of knowledge and experience. The Bishop of Gloucester, with refreshing bluntness, says that what thoughtful people are demanding of the Church of England is not greater authority but greater intelligence, and the words have an equally direct reference to other Churches.

The majority of Christians must needs accept the authority of the Church for what they believe, and, in their circumstances, their acceptance of it can be a truly spiritual and reasonable action. Yet this acceptance, so far as it is unquestioning, cannot be recommended as the ideal spiritual response: it is merely the best possible within the limitations of particular circumstances, capabilities and opportunities. The larger the number of questions regarded as completely closed by authority, the more disastrous is the cramping of the mental life of Christians which is a vital activity of full spiritual life and essential to its growth.

The formal definitions of Christian faith are, as is frequently said, 'primarily negative', i.e. they were framed to rule out denials and attractive solutions which were found to lead away from something essential in the Christian revelation and important in religious life. They need not be regarded as wholly adequate expressions of religious truth, final and irreformable. No intellectual summaries of the nature of God or of the significance of Jesus are the proper subject-matter of revelation or of religious faith: only



the personal living God and His Christ can legitimately hold that status. The creeds are but sign-posts indicating the direction in which truth is to be found: they are not ring-fences within which is all religious truth and outside which is none. They are venerable, but they often require excessive explanation to make them intelligible.<sup>1</sup> The desire and willingness to serve God and to follow Christ, and ability to serve intelligently, are more important as the conditions of membership in the Church and for office in the ministry than acceptance of ancient creedal summaries. Employed as tests or as safeguards of the truths embodied in them creeds often fail of their effect; for this use of them prevents multitudes from coming in sight of those saving truths. Such use of them may exclude the sensitive, the intelligent and the honest: it can never keep out the ignorant, the unintelligent and the dishonest, from whom the Church has always most to fear.

On the other hand, the individual who realizes that he is called to make a full spiritual response to the challenge of the Christian faith, and who cannot see the value or the relevance of a particular doctrine to the religious life, or who feels that knowledge no longer permits reasonable faith to affirm it, ought to

<sup>1</sup> In spite of their great learning and real value, many of the more weighty books written to commend the Christian religion do not have much influence. This is partly because they are not read; but it is also because such books are often regarded by other intellectuals as ingenious defences of positions and propositions which no one would now assert if they had not come down to us from the past.

hesitate long before rejecting it when others, no less Christian and no less freely intelligent, think otherwise. He will always be ready to recognize that the Church has an inevitable, real and justifiable authority so long as he does not presumptuously claim for himself what, in doing so, he denies to the Church.

When all else has been said, and however true it may be, it remains that the Church's authority in faith and in morals will never be strong unless or until the desire for active membership in the Church is strong, which means not until men are attracted to the Church by the quality of its life and teaching. All the argumentative establishment and vindication of claims to authority, and likewise the modification of them, will avail little until the Church not only expounds its ideals but also displays them more effectively. The world will never believe that the spiritual treasures claimed by the Church are really in its possession until it can confront the world with a much larger measure of them actualized in its corporate life.



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